THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

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NAPOLEON SOLO ILLYA KURYAKIN

They knew no law but evil. Their leader had said, "These men must die! Their names are Solo and Kuryakin!"

THE GOLIATH AFFAIR

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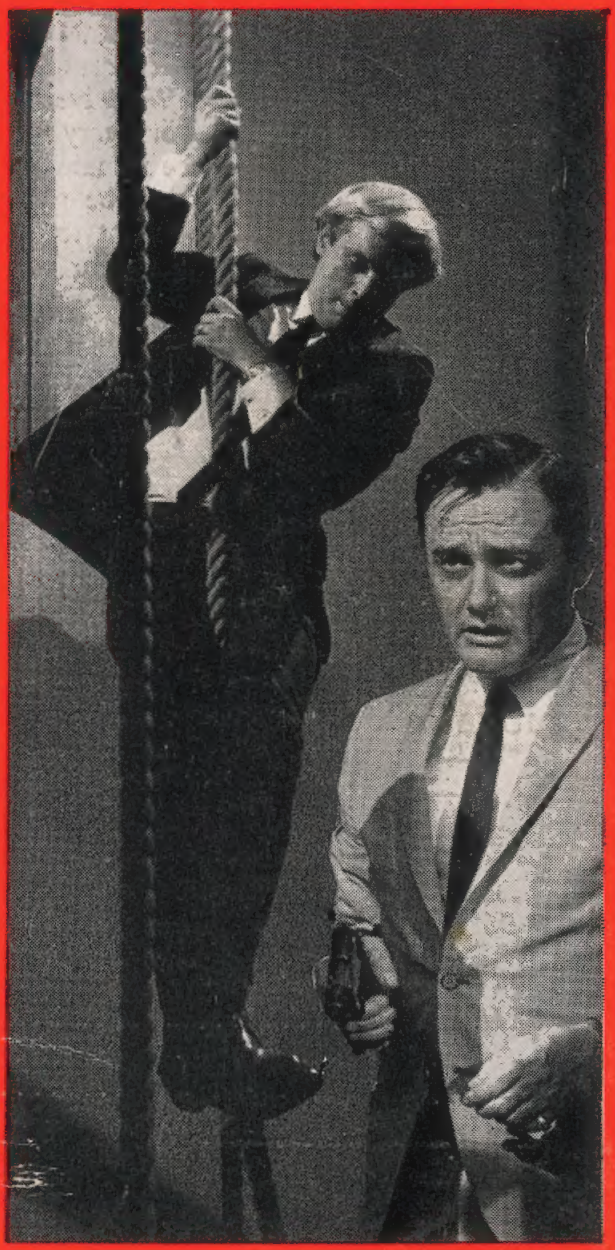

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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

DECEMBER, 1966 VOL. 2, No. 5

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE GOLIATH AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Trapped, lost, two desperate U.N.C.L.E. agents face their greatest peril—a horde of brain-washed, senseless girl monsters, who have been told—"One man must never escape from here alive. His name is Napoleon Solo." . . . . . 2 to 75

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THE GOLIATH AFFAIR

They knew no law but evil, the laughing giantesses from the Black Forest, who murdered with a caress—and died with a smile. Their leader had said: "This man must not escape. His name is Napoleon Solo!"

THE NEW COMPLETE "U.N.C.L.E." NOVEL

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

PROLOGUE—THE MAN WHO KNOCKED THEM DEAD

THE COMELY young lady reposed on a multicolored beach towel, sunning herself. Her hair was long and red. Her figure was superb. Her two-piece white bikini was hardly more than a token acknowledgment of certain laws concerning exposure of the human body. Mr. Napoleon Solo didn't mind at all.

What he did mind was the tantalizing way the redhead kept sipping from a tall, frosty glass of what appeared to be lemonade.

Lying on his belly in the hot sand, with the sun driving a screw of pain into the back of his skull, Solo licked his lips and listened enviously to the tinkle of ice in her glass.

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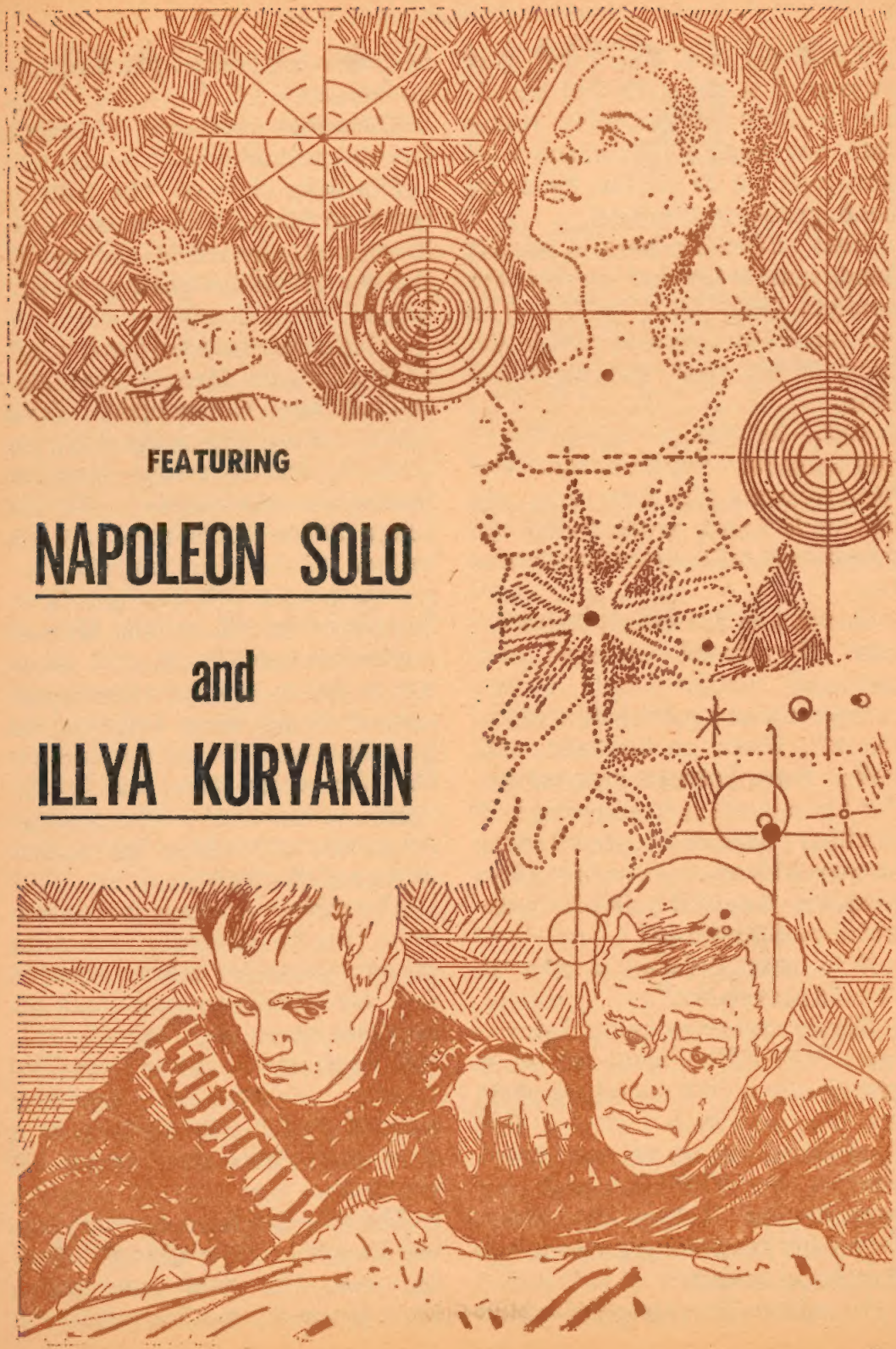


FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO

and

ILLYA KURYAKIN

Decidedly odd, Solo thought as he peered at the dune just ahead. On its crest the charming young lady was worshiping the sun with seemingly no ill effects. Suddenly her figure became blurred.

Solo rubbed the back of his left hand against his eye sockets. He couldn't quite focus on her. The sun turned the screw of pain in the back of his head one more full turn.

Odd, he thought again. Until this moment, Napoleon Solo had been unaware that there were any lemonade stands on the Nefud, the fearsome Red Desert of Saudi Arabia.

A voice at his elbow distracted him: "Napoleon? We must keep moving."

Solo turned his head drowsily to the left. There, on his belly, with bulky pistol holsters strapped under his armpits and glittering bullet-filled bandoliers crisscrossing his sweat-black rag of a shirt, Illya Kuryakin provided a decidedly unwelcome interruption.

"Go way," Solo murmured. "You'll disturb her."

Illya's eyebrows quirked downward. "Her? Napoleon, the sun is getting to you. We must keep moving. The station is just over that dune ahead but we are not certain whether the THRUSH unit has been alerted. If they have been, they may be making preparations for a hasty exodus."

Napoleon Solo struggled to his feet, swaying in the light, furnace-hot breeze.

Once he stood up, Napoleon Solo felt miserably ill.

His belly churned. His temples began to vibrate. The tawny endlessness of sand tilted and swam. But the ice in the girl's glass still tinkled.

"Got to ask her where to buy it," Solo mumbled through dry, sun-cracked lips. He stopped. Weird music, all off-key, wailed in his ears. He felt as though he were turning in slow circles, while his heavy desert boots somehow remained stationary in the sand.

Solo tried to lift his right boot. Sand dribbled off the toe. He was hardly his dapper self, clad as he was in disreputable, grease-stained suntans which were supposed to help maintain the fiction that he, like the other two U.N.C.L.E. agents, was a member of a geological search crew whose 'copter had wandered off course.

The tableau held one frozen moment longer: Solo swaying against the background of a brass sheet of sky, his beard sprouted and his eyes not quite sane. On his left, still belly down, Illya Kuryakin, equally sweaty and unkempt, glanced past his friend Solo to a third man, who also lay on his stomach.

The trio had been crawling forward together, mile after skin-flaying mile. The third man had a blunt jaw and blond hair which the

sun had bleached white. He was the U.N.C.L.E. station chief at Khaibar. His cable had pulled Solo and Illya out here in the first place.

"Peterson?" Illya formed the man's name silently with his lips. "When I count three—*Jump him.*"

Peterson nodded quickly. A single yell from Napoleon Solo could give the game away, could alert THRUSH guards who might be waiting just past the dune. For his part, Napoleon Solo wondered idly why his companions were watching him with such peculiar expressions. Frankly, he found their attention irritating.

Solo wished his head would stop buzzing. The sun-screw tightened again. This time it bored straight down into the top of his skull. Silently and profanely Solo dismissed his companions, bothering only to wave at Illya in disgust.

Illya had gone into a half-crouch. He appeared to be mouthing some nonsense syllables. Napoleon Solo was annoyed by the whole moronic situation.

"Listen," Solo began, "I'm going up there and ask that girl—"

"—three!" Illya breathed, moving fast. He and Peterson jumped Solo from either side.

A startled outcry nearly blasted the desert silence with sound as Peterson and Illya bore Solo to the ground. Fortunately Illya managed to get his left elbow jammed between Solo's teeth. Solo resented this. He thrashed vigorously and attempted to sink his teeth into the bone.

The complete novels depicting the amazing advantures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

Solo discovered someone's grimy fingers working their way around Illya's elbow into his mouth. Something rolled against Solo's tongue.

"Let go," Peterson cried softly. "I got the pill in him."

Illya whipped his elbow back an instant before Napoleon Solo's outraged molars clamped together. There was a faint crunch as Solo bit through the gelatinous shell of a capsule.

Cool, thick, minty liquid rolled over his tongue. Pinwheels exploded behind his eyes. He passed out.

Solo opened his eyes ten minutes later, groaning.

The simmering sand grated against his right cheek. He had a feeling that he had done something very ill-mannered. He rolled over

on his back. Peterson and Illya were hunkering down near him.

Solo struggled to sit up. As he did so his eyes slid past the empty top of the dune just ahead. And he remembered the whole thing.

First came the frantic communique from Peterson stating that operatives of the Saudi Arabian unit had at last located the THRUSH cell. Over the past months the cell had been methodically dynamiting major oil pipelines and leaving evidence behind that the work was done by terrorists who owed allegiance to a nation in this explosive, oil-happy part of the world.

The THRUSH intent, of course, was to create frictions which could lead to an international incident and, if all went well, a disastrous war between two major Near Eastern powers.

Such a war would seriously cripple the flow of petroleum to the world's industrial countries and would create the kind of unsettled situation upon which THRUSH could and would capitalize.

Napoleon Solo looked sheepish. "I know something happened, from the way you're looking."

"We thought," said Illya dryly, "that you planned to yoo-hoo a greeting to our THRUSH friends over the hill."

"The sun got you," Peterson said. "You saw a girl up there on the dune. She was drinking lemonade."

Solo made a thoroughly adult face. "Lemonade! I did slip a cog."

"Lucky I had the proper capsules with me," said Peterson, with a faint hint of a British accent. "You chaps who come out from Operations and Enforcement to knock over these cells ought to take climatization drill before popping off to crawl three miles across the Red Desert. We field chaps have the impression that you headquarters chaps train in cocktail bars."

Illya made a sharp gesture. "Let's not fall to bickering. We've work to do."

Peterson mopped his upper lip. "Sorry. The sun even makes me edgy, and I've been out here four years now. But I lost my best man to a dagger in the spine back at Khaibar. I don't want this particular little maneuver to fail. When Tommy turned up knifed, I decided THRUSH had gotten wind that we'd located the cell. If so, they may be hurrying to close down and move on."

Peterson's pale eyes grew extremely hard. "I don't care to see that happen. Tommy was a top U.N.C.L.E. man, you know."

"I'm sorry I cost us time—" Solo began.

Illya ticked a fingernail against the crystal of his watch. "It's already 0715 hours. We're fifteen minutes behind schedule. Shall we move out?"

Some of the buzzing was clearing from Solo's head. He flopped

belly-down in the sand. His companions did likewise. Silently the three men began to crawl upward toward the dune's crest, using their elbows and knees to propel themselves along.

Through his sweat-sodden shirt Solo could feel the heat of the desert rising to flay his skin. On his back, where the sun beat, the heat was even worse. And it was as yet only a relatively short time past dawn. Fortunately they soon crawled into a patch of purple shadow on the near face of the dune. From there they worked themselves slowly upward in relative coolness.

Here it felt only 100 or 110 degrees, not 130 or 140.

Solo's mind slid over the events of the past hours. He and Illya had flown from New York and met Peterson in the city of Khaibar the preceding sunset. In a ramshackle 'copter Peterson flew them roughly northeast out into the Red Desert. Toward the end of the night Peterson set the 'copter down, using its radar and the stars to hit the precise location he wanted.

At first light they set out overland, their destination three miles away. Solo now felt chagrined that the heat had affected him so drastically, but he didn't indulge in self-pity for long.

They were near the crest of the dune. Demolition of this THRUSH cell was crucially important. Every nerve, every ounce of his mental power had to be concentrated on the fast surprise attack—

"Carefully, chaps," Peterson whispered. "Let's take a peep."

With extreme caution the three U.N.C.L.E. agents raised themselves just sufficiently for a good view of the land beyond the dune.

Perhaps a hundred yards ahead, round, ominous and helmet-shaped, a steel structure protruded above the sand. Its bluish surface appeared unbroken except for the tiny punctuation of rows of rivet heads.

Beyond it a short concrete airstrip, pitted and cracked in many places, stretched away into the blazing, wavering horizon. An unmarked, double-engined turboprop plane stood on the ready line at the end of the strip nearest them.

A hot breeze lifted sand whorls here and there. Otherwise nothing moved.

"They're all underground having their morning vodka and potatoes," Illya said with a macabre grin.

"Bacon and eggs," Solo corrected, working one of the special pistols loose from its holster. He palmed the heavy butt and began to insert bullet-like projectiles from his bandoliers into round receptacles at the muzzle end of the weapon.

"Whatever they're eating in that warren under the sand," said Peterson, "shall we interrupt?"

The three U.N.C.L.E. agents

worked now with trained precision. Each loaded eight of the special rocket-propelled demolition bullets into the honeycombed ends of the weapons. The guns were the latest innovation of the U.N.C.L.E. research laboratories.

Each man flipped up the homing sight on his weapon, extended his right arm and braced it. In a matter of moments three right arms were aimed out across the dune top at the pillbox.

Solo began to count downward from five. On signal, the three pistols would discharge a total of twenty-four projectiles which would obliterate the pillbox structure above ground and fill the area below with such heat that the THRUSH agents lurking in the tunnels and offices would be crisped.

"—three, two—" Solo counted.

Up from the sand directly in front of him shot a periscope, its glass eye watching him. Klaxons began to warble.

"A trip wire somewhere!" Peterson bawled. "We missed it, damn it!"

At the pillbox, a section of its curved wall facing the dune was rolling back. From the opening a medium-caliber anti-personnel cannon shot forth its wicked barrel. There was a quick, ear-knocking *chuff*. Straight at the dune, a white-sizzling charge came rocketing.

Illya was already throwing himself wildly to the left. Solo followed. Peterson rolled in the other direction. The rocket howled and crashed into the top of the dune where the three U.N.C.L.E. agents had been lying only moments before.

The whole summit seemed to erupt in a white, spurting cloud. A thunderous explosion slammed Solo's ears and threw him forward forcibly three yards. Sandlike glass stung the back of his neck, drawing blood.

"Dirty blighters got the jump on us!" Peterson was on his feet, aiming his demolition pistol at the pillbox.

Illya and Solo began running to their left, Illya going ahead of his friend. Strung out, they presented three targets rather than a single one for the cannon. It was swiveling from left to right and back again as the gunners sought a new quarry.

Where the dune on which they had been lying sloped down, Solo flung himself out on his stomach. The cannon chuffed. A sizzling streak of white fire flashed over his head and blew up the desert two hundred yards behind him. More sand rained down. Solo steadied his right arm and began triggering the demolition pistol.

Another port in the pillbox had opened. Several ill-uniformed Thrushmen with high-powered rifles were stumbling out to do battle, egged on by a shrill-voiced officer

who was ordering them forward in Arabic.

The officer remained conveniently screened from danger behind his men. Solo's demolition pistol smoked and bucked. The tiny but potent projectiles spurted out one after another.

Illya was setting up a cross-fire with his own pistol, mowing down the Thrushmen. Solo saw the muzzle of the cannon peel back upon itself, flow limp and molten for a heartbeat of time. Then it disappeared in a flash of scarlet fire. Solo's slugs had found their mark.

Peterson's demolition pistol emitted four lethal blasts before Solo shouted, "Hold your fire! We won't have time to re-load if they try—"

Unfortunately Peterson didn't hear. The morning burst open with a splatter of sound as the engines of the plane shrieked to life. Somehow a pilot had darted out—probably through an escape port on the pillbox's far side—and boarded the plane during the firing. An escape seemed imminent.

Peterson hadn't let up, either. His remaining four demolition bullets polished off the last of the Thrushmen who had rushed out, including their reluctant officer. The whole near side of the pillbox was a dancing apparition of flame and smoke.

"The plane!" Illya bawled through the noise. "Napoleon, follow me! We must stop the plane!"

Legs churning so hard they ached, Solo raced after his friend. Peterson was right behind.

Solo tried to re-load the pistol on the run, with little success. The heat boiled out from the melting pillbox. Smoke billowed, obscuring the airstrip briefly.

Just as Napoleon Solo caught up with Illya and the two of them started around the left side of the THRUSH station, two men darted from the hidden escape hatch nearest the airstrip and raced for the plane.

One man, of slight stature, wore a rumpled THRUSH uniform and had an attache case handcuffed to his left wrist. That would be the station chief, taking all key documents with him. It was the man lumbering along at the station chief's side who curdled Solo's blood.

Through the smoke the man loomed up, a misshapen apparition with sloping shoulders and arms that hung nearly to his knees. The man had a bulbous, lemon-shaped head of grotesque size. Huge ears stuck straight out. His nose was a gigantic wreck. His eyes seemed to burn through the heat and smoke like brown lanterns as he turned and whipped up a gun which looked like a toy in his huge fist.

The man stood at least six feet eight inches tall, a grotesque giant.

Illya and Solo slammed themselves on the ground for cover as the giant fired. The bullet buzzed

harmlessly by. The hatch of the plane had been opened. The section chief was climbing up. The giant aimed a second shot. His gun jammed. He threw it away. His face wrenched into the vilest expression of hatred Napoleon Solo had ever seen.

From the plane's hatchway the chief called, "Don't waste time on them, Klaanger. Hurry—"

Klaanger? *Klaanger?* Somewhere a frantic little bell rang in Solo's mind. But the meaning of the warning escaped him.

The hulking Klaanger turned and lumbered toward the plane. At that moment Peterson came charging up behind Solo and Illya. He went right on past. Peterson's face was black with anger, and he ran with surprising speed for a man of his size.

Illya and Solo went after him, both of them trying to load their pistols on the run so that they could halt the plane.

Peterson flashed out ahead of them, fighting his way through the blast of air from the port engine just as Klaanger hauled himself clumsily up into the hatchway.

Shouting curses, Peterson flung his empty demolition pistol at Klaanger. The weapon whanged off the fuselage, a bad throw. Peterson leaped, caught the edges of the hatchway, intending to pull himself into the plane in a suicidal attempt to stop it.

Solo and Illya had just reached the plane's tail section. They were running at top speed. Wind from the engines blasted them, thrust them reeling back. And in that howling, smoking delirium, the horror came—

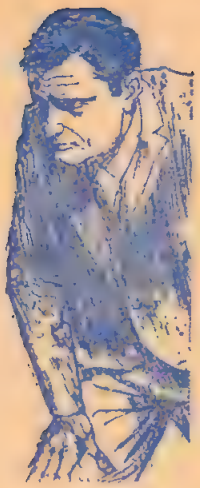
Klaanger appeared to crouch down in the hatchway as the aircraft started to roll. The man's liverish lips curled up in a bleak imitation of a smile. He balled his right fist, shot it forward and gave Peterson, who was struggling and hanging there in the hatch, what seemed to be the lightest of taps on the top of the skull.

Peterson's head popped open like a fruit.

For a moment a piercing thread of a scream filled the morning. Then it was drowned out by the roar of the plane's engines. The turbo-prop surged forward. Klaanger hung in the hatchway, laughing uproariously as the THRUSH craft lifted lazily to its escape—

There at the end of the airstrip, caught in the sudden intensified surge of wind from the accelerating plane, Napoleon Solo felt warm droplets against his face. The wind blew blood upon him, and upon Illya. Peterson's blood.

The plane whined, screamed, lifted silver against the flaming circle of the sun. Gradually the roar of the engines diminished. Solo and Illya watched the craft become a speck vanishing far off over the desert. Defeat showed in the slope



of their shoulders as they stumbled forward along the blood-spotted runway.

"God in heaven!" Solo breathed.

Peterson's body lay sprawled on the concrete, dead and incomplete. Instead of a head, there was nothing but a grisly gray and red welter, sickening to look upon.

Illya's eyes were soot-stained, haunted. "What sort of a monster was that man, Napoleon? To do that with a tap, a little tap—" Wonderingly, Illya raised his own rather fragile-looking right hand and stared at it. "Just a tap of one hand."

Behind them silence enfolded the destroyed pillbox. Here and there hot metal creaked. Solo's voice sounded harshly:

"I've seen that man somewhere, Illya. Somewhere a long time ago I saw him. I remember something else. He wasn't tall. He was scrawny. Small and scrawny. But it was the same face. I know it was the same face. Or—almost."

Slowly Napoleon Solo turned and stared into the sun-blasted sky. The plane had gone. What lingered was the dawning significance of the horror which the two U.N.C.L.E. agents had discovered at what they had thought was the end, not the beginning, of a mission.

Raspy-voiced, Illya put it into words:

"What is THRUSH breeding, Napoleon? Supermen?"

PART ONE

DEATH TO ALL 97-POUND WEAKLINGS!

HAD IT NOT been for one relatively small piece of evidence, Mr. Alexander Waverly would have been unconvinced.

The evidence lay in the center of the motorized revolving conference table in the center of the chamber which served as the planning room for U.N.C.L.E.'s Operations and Enforcement Section.

This chamber was located high up in the unbelievably modern and complex offices and research facilities concealed behind a front of decaying brownstones on a certain street in the East Fifties.

Arms folded across his immaculate tweed jacket and perpetually unlit pipe clenched between his teeth, Mr. Waverly slowly circled

the conference table. He stared down at the item of evidence with an *I really wish you hadn't brought this up* expression on his lined face. At last he halted and uttered a short, emotion-charged word.

Napoleon Solo was lounging in one of the deep leather armchairs near the table. His right eyebrow hooked up in surprise. Mr. Waverly's resorting to purple language was highly unusual, to say the least.

Mr. Waverly waved his pipe stem at a small, curled, three-by-five inch photo print lying on the table. "We have quite enough bonfires burning at this very moment. We are stretched thin in terms of personnel. Now you bring this back. I don't know where I'm going to find agents available to handle it."

Napoleon Solo reached inside his faultlessly tailored dark blue blazer and extracted a thin two-dollar cigar. He lit it and inhaled the pungent tobacco with relish. He wasn't much of a smoker. It hampered his physical conditioning. But this cigar symbolized his return to civilization.

He and Illya had been back in the U.S. less than thirty-six hours. He had finally succeeded in scrubbing and scouring all the Saudi Arabian sand out of his pores. Liberal doses of antibiotic lotion had somewhat mitigated the blistering sunburn pain which had set his skin on fire just as he and Illya had regained the 'copter after the attack on the THRUSH station.

On the long flight back to America via a commercial jet—poor Peterson's remains were flying specially crated in the cargo hold— Solo sat miserably in his seat by the window. The brace of charming young things in trim uniforms who serviced the aircraft's first-class compartment hovered over him, solicitious and eager to minister to his comfort with pillows or cocktails.

The sunburn unmanned him, made him feel awkward and adolescent. How in heaven's name could you carry on amusing, provocative conversation with a pretty girl when every other minute you were scratching your ribs through your shirt?

Besides, there was the evidence; the evidence carried in a flat black leather card case in Solo's inside jacket pocket. It served to depress him thoroughly as he thought about its significance for almost the entire flight.

Just before departing from the annihilated THRUSH station in the desert with Peterson's remains wrapped up in a canvas, Illya had popped open the crystal and face of his oversized watch and aimed the revealed inner workings at the sorry bundle of flesh slowly gathering flies on the blood-spattered airstrip.

Illya Kuryakin snapped the picture. The technical office in Port

Said processed the film for them. Thus they were able to show Mr. Waverly a photo of Peterson's body moments after the head had been literally knocked off by the man Klaanger.

Now, while Solo puffed on his cigar, Mr. Waverly examined the photo again. Then he tossed it back on the table.

"Incredible," was Mr. Waverly's comment.

"I'd say impossible," Solo spoke, "except that Illya and I saw it happen."

"I cannot believe that a human fist could do such damage, Mr. Solo."

"No, sir, not my fist, or yours. But Klaanger's did."

"Such a thing is simply not to be countenanced!" Mr. Waverly gestured rather melodramatically, as if trying to convince himself.

There was no escaping the depressing possibility that the dreaded organization against which U.N.C.L.E. fought had once again discovered a way to twist and warp the laws of nature to serve its own malevolent ends.

Mr. Waverly walked to the window. He ticked his pipe stem against the sill and gazed out at the light-spangled panorama of New York by night. Softly he said, "My first inclination is to dismiss the man who did this thing as some kind of freak. A throwback, a biological monster of the sort which the world unfortunately does produce from time to time. But then, Mr. Solo—" Waverly turned to confront his agent with a piercing, skeptical gaze. "—then you inform me that you recognized his face."

Solo nodded. "I did. Unless the sun drove me completely loony twice in a row, I'd swear that the man I recognized was—well, wasn't so big the time I saw him in Germany. That's why I thought it was important to bring it to your attention."

On a table under the now-blank closed circuit television screen, a blue stud on a white phone lit up suddenly. Mr. Waverly picked up the receiver.

He muttered a monosyllable, hung up.

"That was Mr. Kuryakin. He's waiting for us in the audio-visual conference room."

Alexander Waverly started toward the door. Solo jumped up to follow. Pneumatic devices hissed the steel panels aside. They moved along briskly down a hall walled in stainless steel. Recessed ceiling lights blinked blue, amber, red, in signal patterns.

An operative in shirt-sleeves and a pistol in a shoulder holster emerged from an open doorway carrying a number of coded flimsy reports. He passed one to Mr. Waverly, who scanned it, initialled it and passed it back.

"Tell the Honolulu station that Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin will

fly out to interrogate the prisoners tonight."

The agent vanished back into the room, while Napoleon Solo did his best to control an expression of surprise.

Briskly Waverly started on, his heels clicking on the highly polished floor. They entered an elevator. In seconds they arrived on another floor. Visions of a chic little vocalist named Mitzi—she was currently appearing at an intimate supper club downtown—fleeted poignantly through Solo's mind as he said:

"Sir, I believe you mentioned Honolulu?"

"That's correct, Mr. Solo. I told you we were spread thin. A three-man THRUSH oceanographic craft was captured by a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Pacific yesterday. The craft's atomic batteries malfunctioned. We have three extremely valuable prisoners in irons in Hawaii at this moment. Unfortunately our best people from that area are on Taiwan, attending to another serious matter.

"Therefore I'm sending you and Mr. Kuryakin out to Honolulu to pry as much as you can from our three hooked fish. Perhaps you understand now, Mr. Solo, why this matter of the man with the heavy fist has come at the wrong time. Naturally we must attend to it, explore its possible implications. But it is not making our task any easier, I'll tell you that."

Waverly paused at the entrance to the audio-visual conference room. "Mr. Solo, may I ask why you are suddenly looking like a distempered codfish?"

"Oh, sorry," Solo said. "It's just that I haven't had a night off in two months—"

"Yes, well, ahem. THRUSH waits for no man, Mr. Solo."

"Neither does my thrush, I'm afraid," Solo muttered darkly, waving a sentimental mental farewell to the shapely young chanteuse with whom he'd planned to enjoy a few of the pleasures of civilized life this evening.

Illya waited for them inside the conference room. He was walking up and down impatiently beside a highly polished board room table. He looked a bit gritty around the eyes, and his putty-colored suit contrasted with the unusual lobster hue of his sunburned face. From his expression, it was clear that he did not have pleasant news for them:

"It took the computers all of three minutes to locate our man, Mr. Waverly. Napoleon was correct. His name is Klaanger. General Felix Klaanager. Look here, sir—"

Illya turned to a console, depressed one of many colored studs. The light level faded as a rheostat took over. Soundlessly, an ultra-wide screen descended from the ceiling on the far wall.

The slim agent touched another

stud. A harsh black and white image flashed on the screen. The slide showed two views of a man's head and torso, one full front, the other profile.

In the darkness Solo felt his palms prickle. Even in monochrome, the face on the screen had that same circular, fanatical luminence which Solo recalled from the dreadful moment in the desert when Klaanger had turned back at them just before making his getaway in the THRUSH aircraft. But there were subtle differences.

Solo said, "That certainly *looks* like the same man—"

"Not quite, Napoleon," Illya said. "This picture is one of several thousand confiscated from the files of the Nazi High Command at the end of World War II. It's over twenty years old. Klaanger of course would be much younger here."

It's the same man and it isn't," Solo went on, musing aloud. "He's changed. And it's more than just age. The man I remember was smaller. But the changes are more than a matter of size." Solo crossed through the beam of the projector. His shadow momentarily obliterated the cruel, arrogant, slender face staring out at them. Pausing at Mr. Waverly's elbow, Solo continued, "The man we saw in the desert was—how can I describe it?—kind of a grotesque oversized caricature of that man up there."

"He was none too gentle looking, even twenty years ago." Illya was looking at the thin-lipped, high-cheekboned image spread across the glowing screen.

"But he looks worse now," Solo replied. "His head, for one thing. It's changed. It's huge, almost as though someone had converted it to putty and pushed it and thumbed it until it became two or three times bigger than its original size. I don't know whether I can communicate the difference to you properly, Mr. Waverly.

"I read about Klaanger in connection with the Nuremburg trials. He was on trial with the rest of those high ranking Nazis. One morning I remember reading in the newspaper that they'd found a body in his cell. It wasn't his body. The face had been destroyed with acid. The dental records showed there had been a switch. Klaanger was one of the very few who was caught and got away. I remember the picture of him. He wore his general's hat with the SS markings."

Mr. Waverly coughed. "All right, Mr. Kuryakin. That's enough of the picture."

"Thank you, sir." Illya touched a stud. The image faded. The screen rolled up again and the light level increased. "I was looking at him for ten minutes before you came in. It's not any particular treat. If you look quite hard, you can very nearly see some of those

three million persons he sent to the gas ovens with his signature."

A peculiar tension was in the room. Mr. Waverly peered at the fingernails on his right hand in the slightly cross-eyed way that was typical of his deep concentration. Illya removed a folded blue sheet from his pocket. In the act of unfolding it, he rattled it. Mr. Waverly glanced up, spoke:

"Thus far, gentlemen, all we have in the way of solid evidence is a single photograph of Peterson with his head gone. Then there's Mr. Solo's conviction that a curiously misshapen giant in Saudi Arabia bears a resemblance—a resemblance only—to a Nazi officer named Felix Klaanger. Is there anything more substantial? After all, Mr. Solo, you had one bout with the sun out there."

"I just have a feeling about it, sir," Solo said. "I'm certain it's the same man."

Alexander Waverly allowed his voice to become somewhat more soothing. "Very well, Mr. Solo. Your judgment has proved excellent on other occasions. And I trust you gentlemen will forgive my seeming reluctance to become interested in this matter. I *must* be interested, of course. But we are going through a rather difficult period in the organization. Several assassinations of operatives have thinned our ranks. If THRUSH attempts to attack on still one more front, we may be in grave difficulty. I wish we had some additional evidence so that we might assign a priority to this problem—"

Illya rattled the blue sheet of paper again. "This won't convince you, sir, in the sense that it's inconclusive regarding what THRUSH might be up to. But I believe it's interesting in the light of Napoleon's recollections—"

"What is that, Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly asked.

"Some dossier data excerpted from the material the computers fed out concerning Felix Klaanger If you'll permit me—"

Illya began to read, skimming over details of Felix Klaanger's birth in a suburb of Berlin, his rise to eminence within the Nazi party, and his sordid history as a mass executioner during World War II.

"That is by way of background, sir," Illya went on. "Here are the significant points. General Klaanger did manage to escape from Nuremberg at war's end. As of this writing he is still at large. He was seen as recently as three years ago in both Portugal and Argentina. Most interesting of all are these items from the section of the dossier headed *Description.*" Illya read out in a flat voice, "Hair, brown. Eyes, brown. Distinguishing marks, none. Height five feet three and one half inches. Weight one hundred and eleven pounds."

Solo burst up from the chair where he'd sprawled a moment ago. "Five feet three?"

"I'm sure this record is correct, Napoleon," Illya said. "Of course the details were compiled twenty years ago."

"Mr. Waverly, the man we saw in the desert stood nearly seven feet tall. He weighed well over two hundred."

Into the quietness of the conference room where filtered air whispered through wall ducts crept a new atmosphere of tension and menace.

Mr. Waverly rose. He began to pace, fingers laced behind his back.

"Let us assume that Mr. Solo's memory is not faulty and that the Klaanger of Nuremberg and the Klaanger of the desert station are one and the same man. In destroying the desert headquarters of the THRUSH cell, you gentlemen successfully closed off one source of harassment.

"On the other hand, the presence of this man Klaanger as an aide to the THRUSH station chief —oh, by the way, the station chief was picked up in Vienna at six last night. Picked up in a garment cleaning van and taken—well, no need to give you the rather grisly details. Only Klaanger slipped through the net. His presence in the desert is disturbing.

"Mr. Kuryakin, you alluded to Klaanger having been seen in certain countries known to harbor ex-Nazis. Does the report contain anything to indicate that Klaanger has been engaged in activities designed to bring the Nazi party to life again?"

Illya ticked his index finger against the blue sheet. "Some suggestions of that only, sir. He is rumored to be a motive power behind the Fourth Reich. But you know how such things go. The iceberg theory. One-tenth is visible, nine-tenths are hidden from sight. I think we can safely assume that if Klaanger still has Nazi sympathies, he will be actively at work preserving the party for a return bout, as the American fight announcers put it."

Under his breath Mr. Waverly murmured a single strained syllable of anguish. Then he straightened, becoming more his old, business-like self.

"Assume then also, gentlemen, that some sort of working coalition has been formed between the remnants of the Nazi party and THRUSH. Assume that somehow, by means of its devious and sophisticated technological resources, THRUSH has found a means to increase the size and muscular capability of a human being. We have evidence to suggest that a man who once stood five feet three and weighed one hundred and eleven pounds has somehow been changed, mutated, so that his height has increased by nearly two feet, and he has gained weight and become a creature of nearly superhuman strength.

"If this is so, U.N.C.L.E. faces an extreme crisis. What if THRUSH has discovered a means to manufacture creatures as powerful as Klaanger? What if this is not merely an isolated, freakish phenomenon but the beginning of a planned program to put scores of these extremely powerful operatives into the field? With such a force THRUSH could in a very short time decimate our own forces and bring us to our knees. And the world as well."

Mr. Waverly paused. His tone hardened. "We are stretched thin. But we cannot afford to overlook the possibility that a new and massive THRUSH menace confronts us. You gentlemen have convinced me of that."

Napoleon Solo uttered a long, relieved sigh. "For a couple of minutes I was afraid you were going to retire us to the funny farm."

"I did not say I was convinced that Klaanger is the first of a new breed of incredibly strong THRUSH agents, Mr. Solo," Waverly corrected.

"You didn't?" Solo said, distressed.

"No. But I am convinced we must find out whether it's so."

"Napoleon and I can take over the job," Illya put in.

Waverly shook his head. "I cannot spare you immediately. We will issue a world-wide Phase B alert, with detailed information on Felix Klaanger. As soon as he is spotted somewhere, I will try to release you to follow up. Until then—Mr. Solo, what are you doing?"

"I was just practicing my ukulele fingering." Solo glanced at Illya. "We have at least one more assignment coming up before we can tackle Herr Klaanger."

Now it was Illya's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Assignment? I thought we were dining downtown tonight. With that little singer friend of yours. What's her name? Trixie?"

"Mitzi," said Solo with a sigh.

"You told me she had a friend," Illya said.

"I regret that must wait," announced Mr. Waverly. "You two are going to Hawaii while I put the complete U.N.C.L.E. network on Phase B alert."

In Napoleon Solo's mind, visions of marching men, ominous shadows against a darkened sky, bedeviled him. They were all identical—huge slab shoulders; arms that hung nearly to their knees; heads that were bulbous and lemon-shaped. *An army of Felix Klaangers marching on U.N.C.L.E. On the world—*

No ordinary U.N.C.L.E. operative, no matter how fine or rigorous their training, could stand against men of Felix Klaanger's strength. And it was the thin line of U.N.C.L.E. operatives, in the last analysis, which maintained the

delicate balance between peace and anarchy, and staved off time and time again the drive of THRUSH for world dominion.

This time THRUSH might succeed if Klaanger was not located. And soon. Things were very bad. Solo and Illya were needed in Hawaii. Precious days would slip by—

"I don't understand this Hawaii business," said Illya.

"Mr. Solo will explain it to you," Mr. Waverly said.

"Aloha, Mitzi," Solo said. Thinking of what THRUSH might be up to while they raced around on other, equally pressing assignments he wondered whether it would be *aloha, world* before very much longer.

TWO

THREE WEEKS, two days, six interrogations, four hand-to-hand combats and one extended visit to Greenland later—after the Hawaiian affair was handled, Illya and Solo had to extinguish a bonfire of THRUSH sabotage directed at the free world's missile defense system—Felix Klaanger was sighted on a street in Munich, Germany by an U.N.C.L.E. man on station there.

Cables flew back and forth from Europe and America. Solo and Illya were jetted to Manhattan on the first available U.N.C.L.E. craft out of Greenland. By the time they arrived and received their orders from Mr. Waverly, another cable had come in from the European branch of Policy and Operations, informing the entire network that the agent who had spotted Klaanger after identifying him from his picture had turned up dead in a sewage ditch.

That is, portions of him had turned up.

A torso.

A leg.

Enough of his lower skull and jawbone for dental identification.

And nothing else.

It was as though incredibly strong hands had simply torn the man's body apart and scattered the pieces.

Beyond the ceiling-high plate glass of the airport waiting room, drizzling rain fell.

The morning was heavily overcast. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin waited in line with the ninety or so other passengers who were preparing to board the immense, four-engined jet with Air Deutschland markings. The jet sat out there on the ready line like a dull silver bird. A passenger agent had just announced over the loudspeaker that despite the bad weather, Flight 414 for London and Munich was expected to depart on schedule.

Solo had been feeling unaccountably tense ever since their taxicab deposited them at the Air

Deutschland terminal at Kennedy International. He felt eyes crawling over him. Illya appeared unconcerned. He was studiously lost in a pamphlet on isometrics.

"After all, Napoleon," he had remarked while making the purchase at the newsstand, "if I am to go up against Herr Klaanger and his fellows in physical combat, I am approximately two hundred pounds behind. Perhaps I can add a couple of inches to my biceps just on the trip across. You're never good company. All you do is ogle the stewardess."

More accurate words had never been spoken, especially in reference to this particular trip. Solo was distracted from his visual search of the waiting room by the sight of the Air Deutschland flight crew. The crew had appeared outside the waiting room window.

As the crew members hurried toward the plane, one of the young ladies assigned to make the passengers more comfortable developed some difficulty with one of her nylons. She paused outside the waiting room window to examine the back of her trimly Teutonic left calf.

Despite the rather unexciting cut of her blue and white-piped airline uniform, she was a shapely pasty, Solo could see. A big, healthy-looking German girl with sparkling blue eyes, yellow hair and pretty, generous red lips. Solo admired her tantalizing hip action as she darted on through the drizzle and ran up the stairs into the plane. He hoped she was assigned to first class.

Abruptly, then, Solo had something else to worry about. He finally localized the source of that uneasy, *they're-watching-us* feeling. Carefully he unfolded a copy of the *Times* and appeared to scan it. Over the top of the sheet he peered obliquely at a man lounging near the water cooler.

The man was portly, wore an eggshell-colored raincoat and a green Tyrolean hat with a gaudy feather in the band. Despite the day's somberness, the man also wore immense sun glasses. Their lenses reflected the fluorescent lights in the ceiling in blue-white star-bursts.

Gently Solo nudged his companion. Still pretending to read, he whispered, "Notice the job by the cooler."

Illya feigned total absorption in isometrics, but his eyes moved quickly over and back.

"The one with the oversized shades," he said. "He jostled me at the magazine stand."

"I don't think he's boarding," Solo said.

"No, and he doesn't appear to be saying good-by to his *frau,* either. He's just watching us."

Solo's mind clicked and whirred ahead. Since the U.N.C.L.E. operative who had sighted Klaanger in Munich had been killed,

chances were good that U.N.C.L.E.'s interest in Klaanger's whereabouts was already known.

Thus THRUSH could quickly have spread an observation net aimed at pegging down known U.N.C.L.E. agents traveling in the direction of Germany. What distressed Napoleon Solo was the open nature of the maneuver. He had seldom known THRUSH to employ operatives who would make themselves so obvious. Those sunglasses stood out too sorely in the terminal.

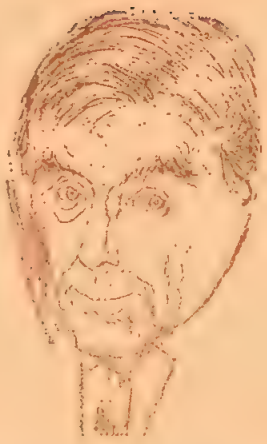
Of course every organization had its incompetents. Perhaps this agent was one of them.

Perhaps there was a perfectly logical reason for the man standing next to the cooler, a reason which had nothing to do with THRUSH at all. Still, the pattern would bear watching. If a tail turned up at the Munich end also, Solo and Illya would be operating under a new handicap. They would know they were tagged before they even began the investigation.

"Here we go," Illya said loudly. The line began to move past the booth where an Air Deutschland passenger agent with a pasteboard smile examined the tickets of boarders.

Moments later Solo and Illya were hustling through the rain toward the first-class boarding stairs.

"Ooops," Solo exclaimed, faking the accidental dropping of his



attache case. Bending to retrieve it, he peered back past his right knee.

Herr Sun-glasses was standing next to the waiting room window, still watching. His hands were deep in the pockets of his eggshell-colored raincoat.

Solo scooped up his case and ran after Illya.

At the head of the stairs the pleasantly-proportioned German pastry Solo had noticed before was waiting to greet passengers:

"Guten morgen, gentlemen. May I see your tickets?"

The stewardess gave Napoleon Solo a sizzling smile. He returned it in kind. Although the point of her jaw was a trifle strong, almost blunt, her features were otherwise nearly perfect and quite lovely. He continued to grin winningly while Illya went to his seat.

Solo juggled his attache case awkwardly from hand to hand.

"I wonder whether you could get rid of this for me, Fraulein—"

The girl quickly filled in the verbal blank which Solo had created:

"Fraulein Bauer. Of course. May I have it, please?"

Solo transfered the case to the girl's hand, experiencing in the process a not unpleasant contact with her soft fingertips. This reassured him that the flight might be diverting after all.

Fraulein Bauer was about to tow the bag in a compartment just behind her when she noticed the white embossed plastic tag hanging from the handle.

The tag bore Solo's full name and the address of a bogus Manhattan flat.

"What an interesting first name," said the Fraulein. "Are you French?"

"Well, temperamentally I guess," Solo replied with a good-natured leer.

The girl laughed. A passenger waiting outside in the damp at the top of the ramp complained about the delay.

"See you later," Napoleon Solo said by way of invitation, and marched down the aisle to his seat beside Illya.

"You think of romance at the most unlikely times," Illya grumbled as Solo sat down.

"Can you think of a better time? Our uncle in Munich, Uncle Doremus—" That was the code for the station chief. "—won't be back until tomorrow morning. We'll have a free evening. So will all the young ladies on the flight, I assume. Munich is the end of the run."

Illya looked miffed. "I intend to devote myself to isometric exercises. I consider that somewhat more practical."

"But dull."

Solo really didn't feel all that jolly.

He could still glimpse the watcher in sun glasses through the oval window at Illya's left.

Fraulein Bauer was busily hanging up coats, soothing an elderly lady who had never flown before, offering a pillow to a young mother who spoke only French and carried a squalling baby. Even though these duties kept her occupied, she still had enough time to glance Solo's way once or twice and smile.

Illya was above it all. He laced his fingers together and pulled hard until his cheeks began to redden from the tension.

Then he relaxed and repeated the exercise.

Solo kept studying the delightful way Fraulein Bauer's trim legs were attached to the remainder of her equally delightful form. He concluded that as a companion for a lonely secret agent at liberty in a strange city, she would be ideal. He'd have to get busy—

Ten minutes after the flight was airborne, Solo had arranged the date.

THREE

AT THE MUNICH airport, another of those oddly obvious watchers picked them up and followed them at a distance from the baggage reclamation area. This man was a slight, rat-faced individual in a cheap suit of somber hue. He walked with a decided limp in his right leg. He smoked a cigarette by holding it from beneath, with thumb and right index finger.

In the taxicab which carried them away from the airport toward the Hotel de Luxe, Solo and Illya decided that this was a cross they would have to bear, at least until they met with their contact the section chief tomorrow morning.

The rodent-featured individual hopped into a Volkswagen just to the rear of the taxi rank and drove behind them by about six car lengths all the way to the hotel.

They registered as Herr Solo and Herr Kuryakin, sales representatives for International Elementary Education Materials, Inc., of New York City. Rat-face was still lingering in the plush, chandeliered lobby as the bellboy bore their bags into the elevator. As the elevator doors closed, Solo and Illya saw their shadow break into a quick stride and head for the bank of phones at the far side of the lobby.

In front of the bathroom mirror in their suite, Napoleon Solo adjusted his tie. Illya Kuryakin lounged in the doorway. "I hope you and the Fraulein have a pleasant evening."

"Your sincerity overwhelms me. And you heard her say she had a friend."

Illya shrugged. "Mitzi, Betsy, Trixie—They always have friends. I was not cut out to be the excess baggage in your romantic life. I prefer to go my own way, thank you."

"With isometric tension to keep you company. Well, have a ball."

Solo slipped into his well-cut dinner jacket and sauntered to the phone. He rang up the service desk and ascertained that his rented Mercedes was ready at the main entrance. Noting the way Illya paced back and forth, Solo frowned.

"Look, you've never raised a rumpus when I've had a date before."

"Fiddlesticks, Napoleon," Illya snapped. "It has nothing to do with your date."

"Then what's wrong?"

"All the Thrushes are twittering right out in the open where we can't miss them. The fellow with sun glasses in New York. Ratcheeks the moment we arrive here. *That.*"

Irritably Illya gestured toward the baseboard. The remains of a pulverized electronic device measuring half an inch on a side glittered dully. A quick search of the

room upon arrival had turned up the device at once. It was crudely affixed to the rear side of a chair leg with electrical tape. One fast stamp of Napoleon Solo's right heel had rendered it useless.

"It's almost as though they're begging us to notice them, Napoleon. That's not like them. What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Solo admitted. "Unless it's all one huge red herring."

Illya's brow puckered. "Possible. But then where's the authentic fish?"

Solo shook his head. He reached into the side pocket of his jacket and brought out the short, rod-like lucite pocket communicator.

Twisting it, he aligned the notches to the correct position. A similar device which belonged to Illya and was currently resting on an expensive coffee table began to emit a low, not displeasing, warble.

Quickly Solo unscrewed the upper part of his communicator. Now he had a cylinder in his palm only half an inch in diameter and perhaps two inches long.

He manipulated a trick fold in the lining of his dinner jacket, slipped the small part of the communicator out of sight and re-buttoned the jacket. The communicator on the coffee table continued to warble, though at a lower pitch.

"There," Solo grinned. "You can keep track of me all night."

"Don't hang your jacket in some soundproofed closet," Illya said. "If the signal weakens the slightest bit, I'll be after you. You wouldn't want to be rudely interrupted, but I'll do just that unless you stay in range."

"Thanks. I'll remember." Solo walked toward the door. "Still time to change your mind and come along."

Illya flopped into a chair and picked up his isometrics pamphlet.

"No, I'll stick at this. With Herr Klaanger and his muscles lurking somewhere backstage, I feel like the typical ninety-seven-pound weakling always facing the rotten end of things in those body-builder advertisements."

Remembering Peterson's ghastly corpse, Solo said, "Don't we all?" and bowed out.

FOUR

THE MOTOR of the Mercedes purred. Behind, the light-spangled area of ultra-modern apartments slid away into the Munich dusk. Solo said, "Where?"

"A left turn at the next corner," Helene Bauer replied. "That is, if you favor good dark beer and quite elegant *wienerschnitzel.*"

"I've always been a veal man. Lead me to it, charming Fraulein Bauer. I was lucky to discover you."

"Ordinarily, Herr Solo," she said in a bantering voice, "I would

not have accepted your invitation on such brief acquaintance—"

"I'll bet you say that to all the passengers."

"Herr Solo—Napoleon—I do not!" Her blue eyes blazed prettily. Then she snuggled against his side and linked her arm in his. "With you—well, you have *der teufel*'s sparkle in your eye, that's all. And I had a free evening. Do we need further explanations?"

"Not a one," he said. His eyes ranged up to the rear-vision mirror. Clipping along behind them through the pools of light thrown by street lamps was a Volkswagen which Solo was sure had been parked near Helene Bauer's apartment. Unless he was mistaken, the driver of that automobile was rat-faced.

Fortunately Helene Bauer was pretty enough in her swirling dress of bluish lacy stuff and her white knit stole to take his mind off mundane concerns, such as the possibility of a THRUSH agent on their tail. She nestled against his side, smelling delightfully of soap and a light, pleasing perfume. Altogether a charming companion for an evening of fun.

Shortly they reached the narrow, dim-lit street where, Helene promised, they would find a restaurant of excellent reputation. This turned out to be *Der Goldenne Schwann,* or so a lemon-colored neon sign above a shabby-looking cellar entrance announced. The other buildings in the area were blacked-out commercial establishments.

Expensive American and European vehicles were parked bumper to bumper on both sides of the street near the restaurant. As they tooled past, Solo neard the raucous noise of a concertina.

"I thought we only had parking problems in America," he grumbled.

"There is a parking area to the rear, I think," Helene answered. "Turn in here."

Solo swung the wheel. The Mercedes bumped down a short alley. At the end lay a small asphalt lot with room to accommodate a dozen cars. Half the slots were already taken. One of the parked vehicles was a silver-gray Rolls-Royce that brought a whistle of admiration to Solo's lips as he parked.

The lot was illuminated by one dim spotlight high up on a steel pole. Long shadows of the parked cars spread out over the ground. Solo hopped out and ran around to the left side to assist Helene. He felt somewhat more relaxed. Just as he turned in the alley, he'd checked the street behind them. There was no sign of the pursuing Volkswagen at all.

"Well," he said in a chipper voice as he reached a hand inside and clasped Helene's warm fingers, to help her out, "here we are, all set for an evening of—"

His right hand began to burn with agonizing pain.

Helene Bauer's face had lost its placid prettiness. Her lips were compressed tightly. Her blue eyes glittered in the reflected glow of the high spotlight. She had closed her fingers around Solo's hand and was squeezing with such fierce power that he groaned in pain and surprise.

"What the devil kind of parlor game is—" he began, trying to jerk his hand away. He couldn't.

Helene squeezed harder, a thoroughly unpleasant smile on her face. Without any appearance of effort, she applied tremendous pressure.

Solo's whole arm heated up with agony. He let out an unmanly yell and went to his knees.

Daintily raising her right leg, Helene Bauer slammed the sole of her pump into the middle of his face.

It was as though he had been hit by an iron sledge. He was driven backward onto the asphalt while Helene Bauer kept hold of his right hand.

She released it just before his arm threatened to tear loose from its shoulder socket.

The back of Solo's head struck the asphalt cruelly hard. Pain danced behind his eyes. Helene's high heels tick-ticked as she walked toward him.

A car door slammed. Other feet hammered heavily. Solo struggled to pull himself erect. The spotlight swam overhead like a bleary eye.

Helene's voice, suddenly harsh and throaty, snapped an order in German. Solo's translating abilities were sorely impaired at the moment, but he managed to figure out that she was commanding someone to watch the alley entrance, to avoid being surprised.

Dazed, Solo tottered to his feet. Helene Bauer stood a yard away, fists planted on her hips. No longer the slightest bit girlish, she regarded him with contempt. Ugly understanding began to seep into Solo's mind then. He thought of Herr Sunglasses at the New York airport, and of the rat-faced man in the Volkswagen. He said thickly:

"Illya was right after all. The herrings were herrings."

"You refer to the THRUSH agents whom you no doubt identified, Herr Solo?" Helene said. "The ones watching you and Kuryakin?"

"The agents I was *supposed* to identify," Solo cracked out. "While the real operator sneaked up on me from behind some perfume and a pretty dress."

"We did not know, of course, that it would work. Now that it has, my superiors will have to admit that I was correct. We knew your filthy local U.N.C.L.E. operative had accidentally sighted Herr Felix—" There was a strange, mystical fanaticism in the girl's voice as she pronounced Klaanger's first

name— "and we disposed of your agent as quickly as we could.

"But we also knew that you and Mr. Kuryakin, or some other U.N.C.L.E. operatives, would be sniffing on the scent soon. I am proud to say that I was the one who suggested the little scheme which snared you. My superiors were not so certain the plan would work.

"When I saw you at the air terminal, I was exalted. Napoleon Solo had been selected for the assignment after all. And Napoleon Solo's weakness for women is notorious. While we kept you bemused with obvious THRUSH agents pursuing you, I set the stage for this little finale. I trust it comes as a surprise."

"Well," Solo said, thinking of Illya, "somebody's going to say I told you so."

Helene Bauer smiled. It was a cruel smile. "No, Solo. You will not have the opportunity to hear those words. Your friend Mr. Kuryakin will never see you alive again."

And with that, Helene Bauer began to advance on him.

She threw aside her white stole. Her blue dress was sleeveless. For the first time, Napoleon Solo got a good look at her tanned arms. They were stronger and thicker than a woman's arms had a right to be. Not that they were unfeminine. They were smooth, firm, sunbrowned. But underneath the skin,

incredible muscles began to bunch and writhe.

"This is ridiculous," Solo said under his breath. "No ordinary girl can—"

Helene Bauer charged full tilt.

Solo whipped up his right fist, thrusting aside every mental reservation he'd ever had about smashing a woman on the jaw. Unfortunately his new attitude of expediency was of no use. Helene ducked under his guard and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Solo felt as though steel bands were constricting on his middle. The breath was squeezed out of his lungs. Helene picked him up with no effort at all and threw him six yards into the side of a parked Cadillac.

Solo hit the Cadillac's right door so forcefully that his head dented the metal. Pain blasted through his entire body as he slid down onto the asphalt. He braced his palms, tried to rise, upbraiding himself for this pitiful performance. After all, she was nothing but a girl—

Helene tapped him lightly under the chin with the toe of her right pump.

The contact resembled being run over by a diesel.

Injured both physically and in his ego, Solo lay on the asphalt, mumbling curses at himself. What was he, one of those ninety-seven pound weaklings?

It appeared so.

Helene Bauer was a female Klaanger. And marching up behind her, he saw blearily, were two incredible assistants, blond-haired, blue-eyed girls whose prettiness was marred by the inflexible, expressionless cast of their features.

Both girls wore short black leather jackets, skin-tight black ski pants and calf-high black leather boots. They were both at least six feet six inches tall.

Like storm troopers, the girls ranked themselves behind Helene, one to the right and one to the left. Solo wobbled up again. The three women regarded him with all the affection they might bestow on a lizard who had invaded their bedrooms.

One more try, Solo thought, doubling his bruised right hand.

"Inge?" Helene barked harshly. *"Schnell!"*

The girl on Helene's right darted forward. Solo rocketed his right hand out for what, in other circumstances, would have been a powerhouse punch. Inge had all the grace of a ballerina as she caught his wrist. She somehow snapped his entire person over her right hip, hurling him against the hubcap of a parked Chrysler.

"Are you persuaded, Solo?" Helene purred. "It is useless to resist."

Battered and bloody, he was beginning to believe it. Helene leaned down, picked him up and slung him over her shoulder. The girls marched to the silver Rolls-Royce, where Solo was dumped unceremoniously into the tonneau. Helene climbed in beside him.

Inge took the wheel. The second Amazon sat beside her, drawing a Luger which she aimed over the back of the seat directly at Napoleon Solo's forehead.

The Rolls motor hummed to life and the car swung back out the alley into the street, gathering speed. Helene got out a cigarette. Solo slumped against the leather. He was trying to gather his wits and not having much luck.

"Have you ever seen the *Schwarzwald?"* Helene inquired.

"The Black Forest? No. I don't think I'm going to like it."

"I assure you we shall do everything we can to make certain you

don't. That is, before you die. What a dreary little man you are with your pretensions of strength! You don't know the meaning of strength. The joy of pure strength—"

Her fingers closed around the cigarette, crushing it to bits. She threw the remains on the floor of the car.

The Rolls sped on through Munich, heading in a direction Solo computed roughly as westward. He wondered whether the tiny transmitter concealed in the lining of his jacket was still functioning. If so, Illya would hear the signal begin to fade. He'd think Solo was smooching with this incredible, cruel-eyed superwoman who sat regarding him with such utter contempt—

At that moment Solo noticed a small pin on the collar of the leather jacket of the incredibly tall girl with the gun. The pin had a black border. In the center, on a white field, he saw the ugly configuration of a swastika.

"So we were right," he said. "The birds and the beasts have gotten together."

"Do you mean THRUSH and the Fourth Reich?" Helene asked. "You are correct. With one purpose." Her blue eyes flamed like illuminated diamonds, hard, cold. "To build an organization of such strength that the world cannot stand against us. We shall succeed."

The Rolls raced on out of the city. Trapped, Solo felt that Fraulein Helene Bauer just might be right about succeeding.

Because he, thus far, had failed.

PART II

THE BIGGER THEY COME

A CLOCK in the spire of the Lutheran church on the square chimed the hour of seven.

Sun spilled gold on to the sloping slate rooftops of the village of Ommenschnee. The gilt light painted the dun-colored cobbles of the square, where a stout farmer's cart drawn by a sway-backed horse was just clopping out of sight around the corner of an inn.

The windows of the inn were still tightly shuttered against the night.

Here a policeman wandered; there the driver of a milk lorry paused to pack his meerschaum with cut plug before driving on with a puttering of exhaust.

Under the shadow of the porch arch of the great church, a smaller blob of shadow seemed to stir, as though about to venture forth among the few good souls who were beginning to move along the narrow streets of this hamlet deep in the pine-scented forest.

The shadow-figure peering from behind a pillar at the picturesque square was an equally picturesque sight: a spindly, seedy peddler with a sack full of cheap imitations of Hummel figurines slung over his shoulder. He wore dark trousers,

an ill-fitting coat which hung nearly to his knees and was nearly worn through at the elbows, and a battered old hat. The face of the itinerant peddler was the color of used leather, exceedingly lined. A white soup-handle mustache drooped below white eyebrows. But the man's eyes were alert, concerned—and younger.

Finally this picturesque personage decided that he could cross the square in relative safety. The cobbles were filling with up-early pedestrians—several shopgirls; children riding bicycles; a couple of sporty youths on muttering motor scooters; half a dozen nuns hurrying toward a chapel of another religious persuasion. Into this setting stepped the disguised Illya Kuryakin, his bag of figurines rattling.

With shuffling step Illya made for a street which angled west from the square's far side. He kept his head down so that the brim of his hat hid his face. He was beginning to feel his exhaustion. He hadn't slept at all the past night, and to compound the fatigue, he was nagged by an unproveable certainty that his whereabouts were known to THRUSH.

The biggest question was—did THRUSH now have his friend Napoleon Solo in captivity?

A warbling note barely perceptible to Illya's ears because the receiver was swaddled in thick layers of cloth under his coat seemed to indicate so.

Where was Solo being held? Apparently westward, in the green-boughed fastness of the Black Forest.

Early last night Illya had been rather lackadasically perusing the isometrics pamphlet in the hotel suite in Munich. Solo had been gone for almost an hour. Illya had just about decided that no amount of finger-flexing and bicep-tensing would transform him into a strong man. He had been about to phone the hotel pantry for a snack and a good stein of dark beer when he became aware that the rod-like communicator lying there on the coffee table was emitting a signal which was growing steadily weaker.

The next twenty minutes were desperate.

Keeping the communicator pressed against his left ear so as not to lose the signal, Illya phoned a lesser official of the Munich U.N.C.L.E. station and rather high-handedly commandeered the station's expensive electronic detection and search sedan. The car took ten minutes to arrive at the hotel; the operator had had a minor brush with the law over speeding. By then Illya had nearly lost the signal from the pocket communicator.

With an emotion almost akin to frenzy, he practically knocked the operator out of the front seat of the dark, unobtrusive sedan and leaped in.

For the next ten minutes he

drove round and round Munich's downtown, steering with one hand while he used his right to twist, turn the various knobs and rheostats on the complicated dash panel.

At last a greenish tear-drop blip appeared on the display glass in the center of the panel. The blip signal corresponded in its interval with the nearly imperceptible warbling still coming from his pocket communicator on the seat beside him.

There! Illya was locked on to Solo's transmitting frequency. But where was Solo going?

After ten more minutes of cruising, the glass showed him.

Either under coercion or of his own free will, Napoleon Solo was heading west. The blip inched steadily toward the left of the screen.

In the direction of the Schwarzwald! Illya hit the gas pedal and sent the sedan careening through the streets at the edge of the night-club district. After another interval of high-speed driving, he had the blip again centered in the display glass.

He drove steadily now, his nerves fine tuned by tension. The blip was not outrunning him.

At three in the morning the blip abruptly disappeared from the glass. Illya computed its last position to be some three miles northwest of a village which the map called Ommenschnee. Illya parked the car on the shoulder of the highway, which at this point cut through giant trees that soughed in the darkness.

Illya hadn't seen another vehicle for an hour and a half.

Working by the feeble glow of the dash instruments, he rummaged in a trunk which had been loaded aboard the sedan in Munich at his

request. A sour face indicated his attitude toward the seamy contents of the Munich station's so-called Emergency Disguise Kit.

He had his choice of imitating a police officer, dressing up as a non-denominational nun—what *were* the Munich people thinking, anyway?—or settling for some scrofulous-looking rags which were meant to cast him in a peddler's role, if he judged by the sack of figurines that completed the outfit.

Slipping into the noisome garb, Illya made a mental note to write a memo to Mr. Waverly concerning the witless choice of quick-change outfits offered by the Munich station. For an U.N.C.L.E. operative to be caught masquerading as an officer of the law or as a member of a non-existent holy order was ab-

solutely idiotic. Inefficiency, inefficiency everywhere!

Illya pulled the floppy hat down on his head and paused in his mental tirade. He realized with some chagrin that he had just been hunting a scapegoat.

He was desperately afraid that through his own ineptitude his friend Solo had fallen into the hands of THRUSH.

But perhaps Solo had only discovered a particularly warm tip, and was off to follow it. Illya reassured himself with this thought as he slid the ersatz walnut dashboard in place over the electronic dials in the car, and locked all doors. The detection and search sedan was constructed of the heaviest steels and equipped with bullet-proof glass. It would take a heavy tank with its cannon blasting to gain entrance.

Illya began to trudge down the shoulder of the road. Pine needles crunched faintly under foot. Suddenly headlights sprang up behind him, racing fast.

Illya's heart slugged wildly as he started for the protection of the trees. He was too late—

The headlights sprayed his back white. Illya hunched over, swung around, slitting his eyes and hoping that the facial stain and fake mustache hair would serve to make him look old. Like white-yellow juggernauts the headlamps raced at him. He prepared to reach for his long-muzzled U.N.C.L.E. pistol beneath his rags of disguise. The vehicle was almost on him—

There was a plaintive moo in the peaceful night as the truck sang past on humming tires. Illya feigned a rapid, rheumy-eyed blink the moment it went by. In the backwash of its lights he saw the heads and horns of cattle outlined fleetingly against the stars.

As the eager dairy farmer raced on toward his destination, a few more soothing moos floated out behind. Illya's heart beat slowed down.

He had been certain that he too had been tagged by THRUSH. But this time it had been a false alarm.

Illya shambled ahead, making himself practice the enfeebled gait of an old man. The trees melted from solid darkness into relative individuality as false dawn, and then the real thing, lit the landscape. Illya's mind churned. Question after question tumbled through it.

What had happened to Napoleon? It was quite unlike his partner to depart suddenly on a fresh trail without telling him. Further, there was no sound at all from the pocket communicator now. This indicated that Napoleon was not attempting to contact him and, worse, was no longer even transmitting.

Had THRUSH already moved in for the kill? Only further trudging to the westward, toward the point in the Black Forest where the display screen blip had blacked out,

would reveal the possible tragic answer.

Presently Illya crept into cover at the Lutheran church and surveyed the square at Ommenschnee. Now, having crossed the square, he was moving down a narrow street where the houses were old, gabled, and close together. A slatternly woman dumped a pail of slops out an upstairs window. Illya had to hop to it to keep from being drenched.

He brandished a fist at the woman by way of keeping in character but he didn't stop to argue. In minutes he had left the village behind and was trudging slowly down what appeared to be a dirt truck track.

It branched off the main highway leading from Ommenschnee at the village limits.

The highway swung roughly southwest. The track went due west, the direction Illya wanted to go.

He had walked perhaps five hundred yards along the track and had just poked his head warily around a bend when he got quite a surprise.

Parked up ahead was the same farmer's truck that had passed him several hours ago.

In the bed of the truck, half a dozen beeves jostled one another, gently discontented but no longer lowing. It was too late for Illya to turn back. The truck driver, a portly German with ruddy cheeks and a mustache fully as flowing as Illya's fake one, had seen him.

The driver was sitting against the truck's left rear tire, making a morning meal of a butt of bread and a quart of milk. Illya's trained mind sensed something awry, but he did not immediately know what.

Once again as he swept his gaze across the truck. He couldn't locate the cause of his instinctive suspicion. Perhaps it was the driver himself. He was an immense man, Illya Kuryakin saw, as the latter stood up.

The driver wiped his none too clean sleeve across his lips, getting rid of a foam of milk. He towered at least halfway up to the seven foot mark, and bore a huge paunch out in front of him. He wore nondescript clothes. His black-haired arms were far too long to be called normally proportioned.

Carefully Illya adjusted his peddler's pack on his left shoulder. That way, his right hand would be unencumbered if he needed to get at the long-snouted pistol in the trick pocket of his shabby coat.

He put on a witless expression and shambled up to the beefy driver, whose fat cheeks were burgher-red but whose eyes were no warmer than glaciers.

"Lost your way, have you, *mein herr?*" said the dairyman in German.

"Nein, nein," Illya answered with an idiot grin. His German was perfect enough to pass muster. "I

am on my way to the village. Hermann is my name."

"The village," said the driver, "is back the other way." He pointed a porcine thumb.

Illya blinked several times. What was *wrong* here? Some detail was out of place. Something so obvious he should recognize it instantly. But light was bad in the forest; there were many shadows, pierced only at random by sunbeams. Illya heard a distant chatter start, somewhere far behind him.

"The other way? That can't be right," Illya complained, trying to sound elderly and irritable. "I saw no village—"

"Then your eyes are blind, old one." The farmer grabbed Illya's right shoulder. His fingers were thick. He applied far too much pressure for one casually interested in Illya's behavior.

The beeves in the rear of the truck were responding to the man's angry voice. They began to stamp and swivel their heads so that their horns caught the light. They mooed loudly. All except one, which seemed to be standing stock-still and glass-eyed in the center.

Glass-eyed? Illya looked again.

The farmer spun him around bodily. Whirled in a complete circle, Illya had a flash-pan view of the hide of that stoical bovine that did not move. He would have sworn he detected something which distinctly resembled a moth-hole in its side—

"Verdammt old fool, be on your way!" The dairyman gave Illya a pop in the back of the spine that nearly knocked him off his feet. The man tried to sound hearty as he added, "It's for your own good. You'll merely become lost in this forest and die of hunger. I won't have your death on my hands."

Tottering and capering and wondering how much longer he should maintain this feeble fiction of being old, Illya plucked two handfuls of figurines from his sack and waved them at the dairyman.

"I don't know what a rude person like you is doing on this road," Illya piped. "But I have figurines to sell in the village. Clever little figurines, see? I intend to pass and go on my way—" Illya continued his tottering progress until he was back to within a yard of the dairyman.

The dairyman's cheeks grew plum-colored. He whipped a snub-barrel automatic from his side pocket.

"Your persistence is admirable," he barked. "But it is also your downfall—*Herr Illya Kuryakin.*"

And with his free hand the dairyman knocked the hat off Illya's head, revealing the U.N.C.L.E. agent's youthful bowl-cut locks.

Cold in his belly, Illya stood at bay, hands full of figurines, eyes watching the gun muzzle most carefully for the telltale jerk which would signal a shot that could very

well end his life. Behind him Illya heard the chatter-and-buzz growing louder in the sky. Without looking around, he knew a helicopter was skimming the tops of the trees.

"We suspected you would be coming, Kuryakin," the dairyman said. "Ever since we took your friend Herr Solo last night, we have been looking—"

"Is Napoleon alive?" Illya interrupted.

Like all Thrush men, this one relished cruelty. He shrugged. "I can't say."

"Where is he?"

"Where you almost got to, before I chopped you down to size."

The dairyman jerked his head to indicate the green-dappled forest depths behind him, to the west.

With surprising agility for a man of his stature, the THRUSH operative jumped up onto the rear fender of the truck and balanced himself, the gun muzzle never wavering from Illya's chest.

The agent reached with his free hand and caught hold of the left horn of the bovine which was standing statue-still in the center of the other animals. It was standing statue-still because it was dead and stuffed, as was revealed when the agent snapped off its left horn and pulled it toward him.

A cable ran from the center of the horn back to the animal's head. The agent said, "I would have taken you when I passed you earlier on the highway, but we preferred to lay the trap this side of Ommenschnee. It's quieter. Sometimes that highway is heavily trafficked before dawn."

The agent thumbed a yellow spot on the horn and the eyes of the phony beef began to blink brightly, first one, then another.

This electrical display somewhat upset the other animals. They began to moo plaintively once more. Into the point of the horn the agent said cheerfully, *"Achtung,* sky one. *Achtung!* Gerhard speaking. No need for you to land with our little friends. I have Kuryakin prisoner.

"The plan is working perfectly, isn't it? They've gotten Solo and now his chum has come running right after him. I shall drive him on in. He's showing no fight. Gerhard signing off—"

Illya flung both handfuls of figurines at the THRUSH agent and dove for the dirt.

The figurines smacked Gerhard in the face sufficiently hard to cause him to lose his balance. He fell from the fender, cursing. As he fell he managed to twist and fire. Illya rolled desperately through the grass as the bullet whizzed by.

Gerhard hit the ground and shot twice more. Illya kept rolling, fighting to drag out his long-muzzled pistol as he rolled. Gerhard lumbered to his feet. He was standing now, had the right angle, could shoot downward at Illya, who was still scrabbling on the ground—

At the first shot the animals in

the truck had begun to moo more loudly, frightened. The electrified eyes of the false beef changed from white to red and flashed with a panicky speeded-up rhythm. The microphone on its cord had fallen over the side of the truck and was dangling down. From it crackled an anxious voice shooting questions in German.

On the ground Illya desperately tried to bring his right arm up in time to shoot. Gerhard had him centered in his sight.

The agent's cheeks worked puffily with hatred. Gerhard's index finger whitened on the trigger. Illya said a quick prayer—

From behind, Gerhard was stabbed in the neck by the tossing horns of a frantic steer lunging against the truck's staked side. Gerhard yowled. He stumbled off balance just as his gun exploded.

The shot winged past Illya's head by a fractional margin. His lips went white and he thumbed his weapon onto rapid-fire.

The gun's stuttering filled the sun-dappled roadside with thunder. Gerhard howled in rage, catapulted backward with holes in his belly.

He died as he hit the ground.

Panting, Illya whirled around. A shadow flickered over the roadway. The THRUSH helicopter was dropping fast, its rotors churning the air just above the treetops and lashing the leaves to a fury. Gerhard's sudden break in communication had alarmed the skyborne members of the trapping team. Sunlight flared on the 'copter's cockpit glass and on two brighter circles within—the lenses of field glasses, watching him.

Sprinting, Illya reached the truck and leaped inside. He flicked over the key, hit the accelerator and slammed the shift rod practically simultaneously. The truck leaped ahead.

He fought to control it. The cattle, maddened, were lurching back and forth like juggernauts in the rear. In the side mirror Illya glimpsed the helicopter setting down in the center of the dirt track. Men leaped out, armed with machine pistols.

A metallic chatter racketed up behind him. Then came a soft, plopping explosion. Another.

The slugs fired by the THRUSH agents had blown the rear tires.

The truck veered wildly, seesawing from side to side along the track. The machine pistols continued to burp and chatter. Bullets pinged and whanged into the truck body. Ahead, a large and adamant oak tree loomed. The truck raced straight toward it, out of control.

Illya levered open the left hand door and leaped out. The dairy truck slammed into the tree with a huge crash. The cattle battered against the slatted sides of the truck bed, smashing through them at last. All the beeves leaped down, tumbling over themselves and stampeded away into the forest.

All, that is, except the electronic marvel. It remained steadfastly behind, missing one horn and its light-bulb eyes now blinking green with alarmed rapidity.

The gasoline tank of the truck let loose. The whole vehicle went up in a boom and blast of fire.

Heat seared Illya's cheeks where he lay on the ground, his right leg bent under him. Instinctively he averted his face, came up coughing in a cloud of nauseous black smoke. The smoke screened his movements temporarily, allowed him to totter to his feet.

Abruptly his right leg went bad, jelly-like. He nearly fell.

He stumbled against a massive tree trunk, grimacing in pain. In the jump from the truck, he'd bunged up the leg. He started to hobble.

A new, terrifying sound split the morning air. Back along the road rose the frenzied yelping of dogs.

Illya lurched into a relatively shadowed area to one side of the dirt track. He risked a glance backward. What he saw chilled him clean through.

Down from the helicopter leaped three uniformed THRUSH officers in boots and gauntlets. Each man held a trio of leather leashes in his right hand. At the end of those leashes strained and slavered nine of the most murderous mastiffs Illya Kuryakin had ever seen.

The dogs yipped and bayed, eyes rolling, tongues lolling, vicious fangs dripping. The first officer released his leashes. The mastiffs shot ahead. The other six came right behind, a line of red maws and relentless teeth coming at Illya with rocket speed.

He lifted his long-muzzled pistol and squeezed off a shot. His vision was blurred from shock. He missed.

The dogs were halfway to the truck. Over the crackling of flames from the wrecked vehicle came the hoarse scream of the senior THRUSH officer:

"Kill!" he howled at his animals. "Kill, kill, *kill!*"

Sweat poured down Illya Kuryakin's forehead. He could never shoot all the dogs in time. He swung around and began to hobble through the forest. Pain beat unmercifully through his right leg.

Snap-and-yap, snarl-and-yelp, the dogs came on behind him. In seconds the chase assumed an eerie dream-like aura as Illya limped and dodged through sunshine and shadow-patches. He had no time to look around. The savage snapping of the killer jaws came closer. Closer—

A certain cold, emotionless professionalism swept over Illya then. Despite the pain and horror of the chase, he managed to pull out a small compass and hold it up in front of his eyes. The needle jiggled wildly, but its direction was still positive enough to show him that he was going the right way.

Well, he thought as he pelted

ahead, this was the ultimate purpose for which he had been trained —to perish like a professional, not a dithering amateur.

Somewhere in the Black Forest to the west, Napoleon Solo was being held a prisoner.

At least, Illya said to himself, *when the dogs drag me down, I'll be right on course.*

TWO

THE BLIP which indicated Napoleon Solo's position to Illya Kuryakin had disappeared in the darkest, bitterest hour of the night —three in the morning. At that hour, though Solo wasn't aware of it, his pocket transmitter had gone dead and caused the blip to vanish.

The reason was that Solo, riding in the Rolls with Helene Bauer at his side, had passed through a stone wall, as well as through a wall of electronic impulses which immediately nullified the effect of any spy or homing devices an interloper might be carrying.

The wall was high, its stone blocks huge and gray. As the Rolls swept up to it and braked, Solo saw two huge men in THRUSH uniforms step into the headlamp glare. Both had misshapen faces and the oversized shoulders and arms reminescent of a Klaanger. They peered into the headlights in a dull-witted way.

"Get those gates open, you incompetents!" snarled the amazon at the wheel. "The *Herr Doktor's* daughter is here."

The guard offered feeble apologies: "I'm new. You didn't give me the countersign—"

"You miserable wretch!" she cried in a temper. "We've been driving all night!"

She snatched the Luger from the hand of the girl beside her in the front seat and promptly fired a bullet into the guard's left thigh. The man fell, writhing and shrieking.

"There's the countersign," the girl declared airily, passing the gun back.

The other guard rushed into a control booth. Instantly, black iron gates swung open.

They were somewhere deep in the Black Forest, Solo knew. But he could tell little else, except that the stone wall was very high and thick.

The girl hummed as the Rolls eased forward.

A rustling of Helene Bauer's skirt as she shifted position caused Solo to glance around.

He'd been watching the tableau outside: one THRUSH guard kneeling beside his wounded comrade and directing ugly glances at the car's occupants as the Rolls picked up speed. Mentally Solo tabulated the information. So there was no great amount of love lost between the ex-Nazis and certain of the THRUSH personnel, eh? Perhaps that situation might somehow prove valuable.

Solo's nerves were wire-taut. His

belly had a chill, empty feeling. But some of his nonchalance was returning.

He especially wanted to find out the exact nature of the union between these two fanatical power groups and, if possible, live long enough to at least communicate the facts to Illya—

That memory of Illya made him wonder about the tiny transmitter hidden in his jacket. Was it functioning? Certainly he couldn't rely on that—

Helene's skirt rustled. She had leaned forward to tap the Amazon driver on the shoulder.

"Inge," Helene said, "that shooting was unnecessary."

Inge half-turned. Her beautiful, stony profile was limned by the pale glow of the dash instruments.

"I am sorry," she said, so flatly that it was clear that she meant just the opposite.

"You and your THRUSH pals certainly have a nice relationship," Solo smiled.

Helene spun around. "Be quiet! We work together very smoothly."

"At what? Demolishing each other? Well, I suppose you can't expect anything else when you make one bunch of paranoid killers the bedfellows of another. But then the problem becomes, which bunch is worse?"

Helene's lip quivered. For one moment Solo was not positive whether the girl intended to curse him or break into tears. He had

probed and found a weakness. Helene's face froze into determined lines, but not before Solo saw a doubtful, hesitant look in her pretty eyes.

Was she as callous and as convinced of the rightness of her cause as she pretended to be? Or was there self-doubt, a deeply repressed feeling that she was in league with monsters?

Perhaps he was over-reacting to that fleeting, uncertain expression. But Helene would bear watching.

In a moment Helene had recovered and was as calm as ever:

"I don't care for your remarks, Solo. I would gladly turn you over to Inge for a bit of discipline if my

father did not have another important use for your carcass."

The word *carcass* made Solo's spinal column crawl.

Inge laughed contemptuously:

"He wouldn't last five minutes with me, Fraulein Helene. He's obviously a weak, decadent type, unused to the outdoors and the joy of physical exercise. I would make liver sausage paste of his bones before he could scream twice. Of course I would be pleased to try—"

"I'll bet you would," Solo said.

Helene was sitting far forward on the seat, staring down the tunnel of the headlights. The Rolls was heading up a recently blacktopped drive. On either side of it Solo could see neatly cut and luxuriant turf.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Solo," Helene said. "My father really is in need of your body."

"What has your father got to do with this?"

Helene's smile was rather ghoulish. "In good time, Solo. In good time."

The Rolls slowed down, curving around a U-shaped drive past some formally clipped boxwood hedges. Then the headlamps swept past the corner of a great stone house. The vehicle braked.

Inge and her companion leaped out. Lugers glittered in their big fists.

A door slammed at the front of the house. No lights showed yet. The area around the car filled quickly with more THRUSH soldiers, all bearing sidearms at ready.

An officer touched his cap and held the door open for Helene. Solo got out after her.

"This way, please," Helene said, mounting a series of stone steps.

Solo followed. He was able to estimate the size of the house whose front staircase they were climbing —it was immense, towering up at least three floors and spreading out laterally in a series of equally large wings to his right and left. A spacious lawn of at least two acres spread out back there toward the gate. A spot of light in the guard booth indicated the great distance they had driven.

Helene moved in beside him as they ascended the stairs, saying; "This place is eight centuries old. It was an ancient baronial estate before it was acquired and refurbished for our needs. You shall see."

With this grotesquely cheerful warning, she led the way through huge bronze doors bearing rampant lions in bas relief. Inside Solo found himself in total darkness.

There was a motorized whine. The giant doors shut with a ponderous chunk. Dazzling lights from a crystal chandelier sprang on.

Solo had thought quickly about making a play in the blackness. Things happened too fast. He had a vivid if fleeting impression of being in a spacious, marble-floored foyer with colorful tapestries on the walls. The foyer was tight as a box.

All other doors leading out of it were shut. Solo and Helene were alone in the center of the floor, and before Solo half grasped all the details of the surroundings, the floor began to sink beneath them.

The walls remained where they were.

The tapestries and the chandelier rose away. When the marble floor had dropped perhaps twelve feet—down here the walls were cinder block, and set with recessed white lights behind frosted glass—two steel panels shot out from the baseboards of the foyer above. The panels met in the center with a clang, immediately providing a new floor for the foyer and a ceiling for the shaft through which they were descending.

Helene fluffed her stole around her shoulders and continued to smile in icy satisfaction.

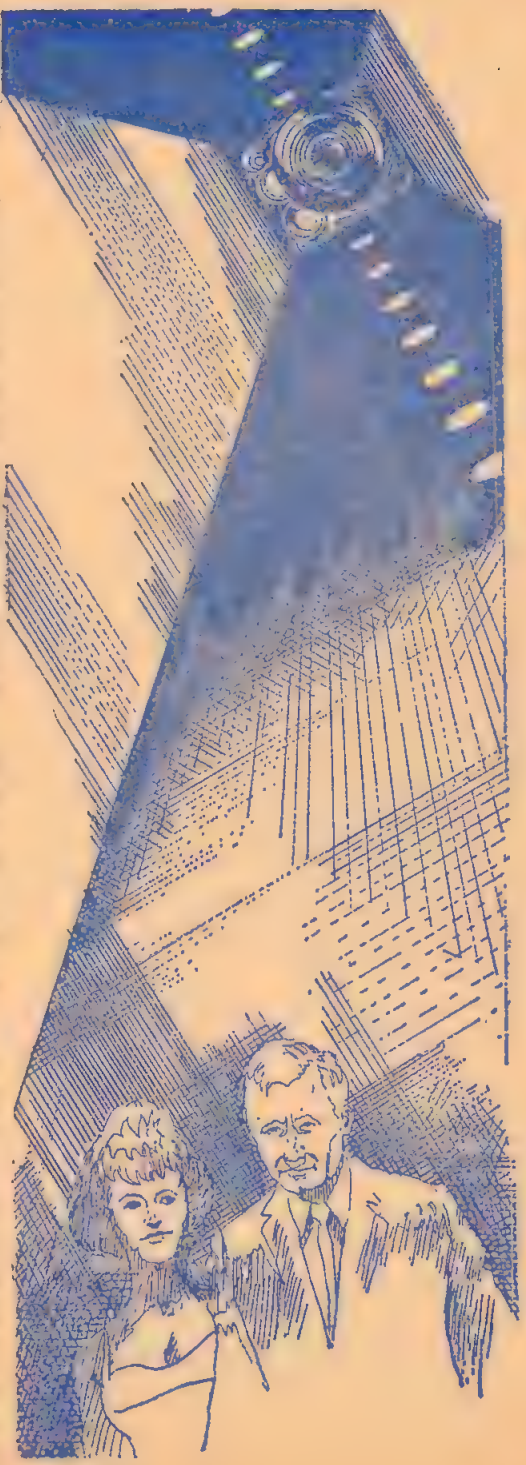
"I ought to go for your throat," he smiled back.

"Why don't you try, *Herr* Solo?"

"Because I'm curious about the rest of this rat's nest."

"Perfectly understandable. Although when you're shrieking in the final extremities of death I'm sure you'll rue your curiosity."

Solo waited with cold palms while the marble floor continued to descend past the recessed white lights. The air had an underground feel and smell, cool and redolent of earth. With a grind of gears the marble floor stopped. Double stainless steel pneumatic doors hissed



back, revealing a corridor with similar metal walls.

A brunette girl in the black jacket and boot uniform was cleaning a murderous throwing knife with a soft cloth. She sat inside a booth with a wire front. Seeing Helene, she sprang up and raised her right hand in the old Nazi salute. The prettiness of her face was marred by the fanatic luster of her eyes as she cried:

"Heil THRUSH!"

The girl's boot heels clicked loudly. Helene lifted her right hand, though with somewhat less spirit. *"Heil!"*

The girl in the booth eyed Solo like a slab of meat as she ran the ball of her thumb up and down the edge of her knife. Like the others he'd seen, the girl stood well over six feet, and had unnaturally wide shoulders and long arms.

"Isn't that heil THRUSH routine pretty sticky?" Solo asked as he and Helene walked on. "Who is your leader, anyway?"

Helene said thinly, "We have but one leader. The spirit of *der Fuhrer.*"

"How did you manage to hook up with THRUSH?"

"We had no formal, world-wide organization," Helene explained. "Here and there we had isolated cells, pockets of agents such as one in South America directed by General Klaanger. Certain approaches were made by THRUSH, inviting our participation in a joint effort. We accepted because THRUSH possessed the organizational structure by means of which we could return to our rightful place of leadership. We have been promised an elite position in the government which THRUSH will set up as soon as this current operation is successful."

The explanation was interrupted by the pneumatic hissing of another pair of doors at the corridor's end. Beyond, a hodgepodge of weird electronic equipment towered up at least two floors. A number of people were gathered in the vast chamber. Helene made a mock bow to indicate that Solo should go ahead. With considerable reluctance he did.

The conversation of the assembled group came to a halt. Heads turned. Smiles appeared, all of them gloating.

Solo stopped inside the double doors. They promptly shut and locked.

On a low balcony all around the cement-walled room, banks of computers blinked their lights and chattered their printouts, manned by THRUSH technicians in laboratory outfits. The other items of bizarre apparatus were ranged around the stone floor of the chamber, but the centerpiece was a kind of leather-padded operating table.

On each side of it a tapered stainless steel pipe was mounted in a drum-shaped concrete socket raised from the floor. These two

pipes shot upward. At the point where they came together, a round stainless steel ball perhaps three feet in diameter hung between them. Something black and cylindrical, resembling a lens mount, protruded from the lower surfaces of the ball, aimed at the leather-padded table below.

Nearby stood several control board consoles bolted to the concrete. All the switches, dials and light-indicators on the boards were powered down, dark. The lab-coated THRUSH technicians presumably in charge of this nightmarish conglomeration of equipment formed the group which had fallen silent as Solo and Helene entered the room.

A small man in a rumpled coat broke free from the crowd and scuttled toward them. He was a strange, untidy figure, carrying a clipboard in one hand and an immense liverwurst sandwich on dark rye in the other. His rimless spectacles had quarter-inch lenses. He was bald as an egg. He must have been well into his sixties, but he walked with a springy, nervous step, his eyes large as brown pingpong balls behind his glasses.

The little man gave Helene a peck on the cheek.

"My *liebchen,* my little girl! We have been waiting for you all night long!"

"We came as quickly as we could, Papa," Helene responded.

The little bald man scrutinized Solo. "This is the U.N.C.L.E. operative?"

"Yes, Papa. Napoleon Solo. One of their best men."

"He gave you no trouble?"

"Naturally not, Papa. We were far too strong."

"Yes, yes, isn't that the truth?" The little old man emitted a maniacal titter and immediately took an immense bite out of his liverwurst sandwich.

Solo didn't quite know whether to tremble or laugh. The little old man finished munching his bite of sandwich and threw the rest of the sandwich away carelessly over his shoulder. Then he subjected Solo to a withering gaze. Solo could practically feel his shoulders, chest and biceps being found wanting.

"We have neglected the formalities, Herr Solo. My name is Doktor Klaus Bauer." Dr. Bauer marched back and forth in front of him. "Do you know why you are here, Solo?"

"I expect that it's because U.N.C.L.E. got curious about your little tea party, and I got a bit careless back in Munich."

Herr Doktor Bauer demonstrated how serious and formidable a foe he could be. He drew himself up to full height and cuffed Solo viciously across the cheeks, twice.

"Make sport of us at your peril, Herr Solo!" he warned. "At this experimental station we are forging the weapon which will bring U.N.C.L.E. to its knees, whimpering and cringing for mercy. Do you

know who I am? Of course you don't! I have been forced to live in secret these past twenty years or face prosecution as a member of the Nazi party. That is a gross insult I will not willingly or lightly forgive—"

"And now that THRUSH has given you a chance to crawl out of the wormwood into the light of day, Herr Doktor—" Solo began.

"Be careful!" Helene said. "He is my papa, remember."

"I don't care if he's the reincarnation of Adolf himself; you're all mad as hoot owls."

Bauer squinted behind his rimless spectacles. "So you believe that. You simply dismiss us?"

Solo shrugged. "That depends on who operates this place. I know the capabilities of THRUSH. But I'm a little doubtful about the capabilities of a bunch of ex-storm troopers—"

"You have seen my capabilities!" Dr. Bauer shrilled. "You have seen General Klaanger, have you not? He was a weakling, a small, twisted weakling until I subjected him to my three-diode enzymatic physio-energizer—*there.*"

With a slightly melodramatic gesture. Bauer indicated the sinister-looking table and the camera-lensed ball suspended above it.

"A mere courier, an errand boy such as you, Herr Solo, could not begin to comprehend the scientific principles behind the apparatus. Sufficient to say that by means of a process known to me alone—a process of ray bombardment which acts upon certain growth enzymes within the body—I am able to literally transform a human being into a superman.

"I can increase strength and size until a man is so powerful, no other human being can stand against him. Why, the process even renders a person less susceptible to death by such things as bullet wounds. Physical resistance to injury, the body's ability to fight off harmful accidents, is increased tremendously.

"Had I had enough money to implement my theories with this kind of equipment during World War Two there would have been a different outcome. And, as it is, THRUSH has sought me out, financed my research and the construction of this equipment. In return, we of the Fourth Reich have joined forces with THRUSH to bring a speedy end to those governments which stand against us!"

In the silence which followed his harangue, a silence punctuated only by the deep, murmurous humming of a power plant somewhere beneath the chamber, Solo waited tensely, wondering what would happen next.

The THRUSH technicians had grouped themselves behind Dr. Bauer. They were watching the back of their leader's head with expressions testifying to their loyalty. One even applauded.

Suddenly, from directly behind Solo, a throaty feminine voice boomed out:

"He sounds mad as a coot, doesn't he, Solo? But he isn't, you know."

Solo whipped around. A door had opened between two of the computers on the low balcony. At the balcony rail stood the woman who had spoken, a tall, splendidly-built girl with stunningly beautiful features and shoulder-length blonde hair.

She wore extremely tight-fitting tan trousers, a hugging sleeveless scarlet jersey and the black boots which seemed to be the hallmark of the shock troops around here.

With one lithe movement she climbed over the balcony rail. She jumped the short distance to the concrete. She walked toward them, swinging a riding crop from her scarlet-nailed right hand. At her wide leather belt she wore a pistol in a holster. Her hair glinted with radiant highlights.

Solo would have allowed himself to be momentarily overwhelmed by her truly statuesque beauty had he not gotten a glimpse of her slightly slanting green eyes.

That color tipped him off. He scanned his mental files, remembered.

"Vanessa Robin," he said. "The last time I heard about you, it was Ankara. You were THRUSH enforcement officer there." *And an infamous killer,* he added by way of

a mental note. This did nothing to reassure him.

Vanessa Robin stalked up in front of him and peered down at the top of Solo's head. She stood seven feet tall, a beautiful, cold-eyed giantess.

"My," Solo said, "how little girls grow these days."

Vanessa laughed liltingly. "Then you really *do* remember."

"You were in the five-foot-six vicinity the last time I looked at your dossier."

"How sweet of you to recall! Even more sweet since we've never met!"

"I gather, dear, that Dr. Bauer has been tinkering with your enzymes?"

Vanessa Robin tickled the tip of

his nose with her riding crop. "You have seen Klaanger, haven't you?"

"I've had that unpleasant pleasure."

"Then you must know that dear Dr. Bauer's process is a complete success. After all, look what it did for Felix. And for me. I was Dr. Bauer's first experiment, I am proud to say."

Vanessa actually sounded as though she was, which distressed Solo no end. Without that terrible fanatic light in her slanting green eyes, she would have been a highly desirable woman. But the power hunger in her eyes repelled him.

"I am equally proud," she continued, "that I was selected to supervise this station for THRUSH."

Solo couldn't stifle a surprised *mmm*. "You're in charge here?"

"Completely. Here, my dear Mr. Solo, we shall forge the weapons that will first destroy the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement and then allow THRUSH to achieve world domination. We have allied ourselves with these dreadfully single-minded Fourth Reich persons for one reason only—to gain Dr. Bauer's allegiance and his secrets."

Helene bristled. "You needn't be so cynical about it."

"Oh do shut up, Helene," Vanessa said. "You'll all get your sadistic little pieces of cake when the time comes. Solo, you'd be astonished to learn what we've had to promise all their people who are working for us. Positively dreadful things—" Vanessa pretended to be shocked.

"They have some ideas about what to do when we take over the leading governments of the world. Well, I can only say that their ideas of torture make the gas ovens of twenty years ago look humane. But we're all cooperating. Our aim is to build a cadre of the toughest fighters that the world has ever seen.

"Very shortly plane-loads of THRUSH soldiers will be flown in and out of here around the clock. Each man in turn will be treated by Dr. Bauer's process.

"And from this dreary old baronial hall will march an army no other force of men in the world will be able to resist! Tireless. Incredibly strong. With positively frightening resistance to the sapping effects of wounds. I'm afraid U.N.C.L.E.'s time—and the world's—has run out at last."

Solo grimaced. "What am I supposed to do? Applaud before you shoot me?"

Vanessa Robin leaned down close. Solo caught a whiff of the raspberry scent of her bright scarlet lipstick.

Her slanting green eyes loomed above him.

"Dr. Bauer has a little experiment he wants to perform on you, Napoleon Solo."

"I don't think I'd make a good superman."

"Oh, not *that* kind of experiment."

Dr. Bauer clucked. "We have been seeking a special subject, Herr Solo."

"This particular experiment is new," Helene put in.

"And possibly extremely destructive to human tissue," Bauer said. "We are uncertain. Thus when Fraulein Robin informed me that agents of U.N.C.L.E. were in Munich, attempting to locate General Klaanger—"

"—who is here on the station, by the way," Vanessa told Solo. "He's simply dying to meet you face to face again." She tapped his forehead with her riding crop, teasingly. Solo had to fight an urge to seize her throat and throttle her.

"Felix, the dear impetuous boy, wants us to turn you over to him. He's gotten so strong, he simply loves working over a—guest. But Herr Doktor Bauer needs your corpus much more urgently. This experiment is vital to his program. We don't want to risk one of our own people. So what more natural than to kill the proverbial two birds? We'll prevent you from telling your superiors about our hideaway and our plan, and we'll do it by utilizing your person for this experiment."

Dr. Klaus Bauer was now almost literally capering from one foot to the other, dry-washing his hands in a frenzy of scientific eagerness:

"*Bitte,* can't we proceed—"

"I have two more things to tell Mr. Solo," Vanessa said. "One concerns his friend on this little mission."

Black anger blazed on Solo's face. "Illya? Where is he?"

"Be assured, he is under scrutiny and will soon join you here. If he lives long enough."

The situation had lost every last one of its comical overtones. No longer was Solo even faintly amused by the sight of little Dr. Bauer rolling his eyes behind his thick lenses while his palms went whisper-whisper as he dry-washed them rapidly.

Vanessa Robin, for all her grotesque increase in size since Solo had last studied her description in the files, was a top-flight THRUSH organizer, bright, utterly merciless and completely professional. The plan which she was carrying out here could be just the critical factor which would tip the balance against U.N.C.L.E. the final time.

With U.N.C.L.E. already stretched thin around the world, a sudden onslaught by THRUSH against key U.N.C.L.E. stations could be disastrous. It could remove the last really strong defense which the free world had against the machinations of the supranation.

The road could lie open to complete THRUSH conquest.

Word had to be gotten back to Mr. Waverly somehow. A fleet of bombing planes on a quick sweep

could wipe out this viper's nest in an hour, nullify the threat—

But how could that word be gotten back?

From the gleam in the THRUSH woman's green eyes, Napoleon Solo was dismally certain that she was telling the truth about Illya.

"One more thing before we begin," Vanessa whispered. Her lips were fragrant, hovering near his. "I have always heard that you were quite the romantic. I want to find out—"

Vanessa Robin closed her eyes for a kiss.

Before Solo could even respond, a murderous pain erupted in his groin. Vanessa had whipped up her right knee to slam him with agonizing force.

Solo reeled back, flailing and punching. The THRUSH technicians swarmed around him. Vanessa's mocking laughter pealed.

Solo stumbled, got off one powerhouse punch that broke the nose of a squealing technician before the others clambered all over him and bore him to the leather-padded table. They flung him out on his back and strapped him down. Vanessa was still laughing, tears of cruel humor running down her cheeks. Solo cursed, writhed—

Dr. Bauer's face loomed over him, as the scientists checked the bindings.

"What we wish to test, Herr Solo," he said, "is the *reversing* effects of my ray process. We wish to discover whether the process can also shrink a person's physical stature and reduce his strength. I must warn you that when we conclude this little session, you may be a dwarf with the strength of a two-year old. Or the process may not work at all in reverse. You may simply be dead. Ah, but that's the scientific method, isn't it? Well, I believe everything is in order. *Achtung!*"

The commands which Dr. Bauer crackled out in German sent the technicians scuttling to the control board consoles. Solo heard switches being flipped, a powerful motorized whining begin somewhere.

A thick head strap cut across his forehead and ran down past his ears. He could not turn his head or move more than a fraction of an inch on the table, so tight were the bindings. All he could see, directly above, was an expanse of concrete and, nearer, the stainless steel ball suspended between the two slender poles.

In the center of the ball, the black lens-like device began to glow a strange metallic blue.

You may be a dwarf with the strength of a two-year old.

Or the process may not work at all in reverse.

You may simply be dead.

Dr. Bauer continued to call orders to his technicians. Solo heard switch after switch being thrown.

The metallic blue light in the lens far overhead pulsed brighter.

You may be a dwarf—

In dreadful fascination Solo watched the lens glow with a brilliant blue. Sweat poured off his forehead, turned his clothing sodden.

Without warning there was a low roar, a whining, and scarlet sparks shot across his field of vision. Then came smoke, more sparks, another flat explosion. Helene Bauer screamed.

THREE
PART III
THE HARDER U.N.C.L.E. FALLS

THE YAPPING of the mastiffs grew louder and more ferocious behind him.

Illya Kuryakin was running with less and less speed every second. His right leg grew more painful with every step.

But how could he stop? Those nine savage animals were snarling and bounding along behind him, gaining fast.

Illya was growing dizzy from the exertion of the run. Every time his right foot smacked down against the carpet of needles and dead leaves on the forest floor, a burst of pain shot up into his skull and blurred his vision.

He breathed in huge, noisy gulps, heedless of the sound he made. At this critical moment, outrunning the animals was more important than keeping silent.

Outrunning? The idiocy of that approach finally penetrated Illya's mind.

For perhaps seven or eight minutes he had been blundering through the sun-dappled forest, hoping to escape the THRUSH canine pack. He had concentrated every effort, every thought on running at top speed despite the handicap of his leg. Now he was beginning to slow down through no fault of his own; and the mastiffs were catching up. He had to think up some alternate plan and quickly.

He rejected the notion of using the pistol which was still clutched in his right hand. The time required to turn and pick off the mastiffs one by one would be too long. Even if he shot one or two dogs, the others would charge off the moment they heard the pistol-shots and probably attack him from a different angle within seconds.

Illya didn't care for the idea of digging in and standing fast, either. The dogs could surround him if he remained in one place too long. He had to devise a way to strike once, effectively.

This whole thought process actually took place in Illya's mind in seconds, while he limped and lurched onward. The light in the forest was tricky. Patches of deep fir-scented gloom alternated with sudden brilliant glades where the sun managed to find its way downward through the boughs.

He had just crossed one of these glades and plunged into the shad-

ows on the far side when he found what he hoped might be the solution—

Bursting through a row of trees on the far side of the glade, Illya nearly pitched into space. He dug in his heels and rocked to a stop, panting.

Directly in front of him the side of a gully sloped precipitously downward. It was a drop of about eight feet. At the bottom a gurgling stream meandered. What attracted Illya's notice was a large, dark opening in the wall of the gully opposite. It was some kind of animal's burrow, nearly four feet high and three feet wide at its opening.

Just behind this, an immense old deep-rooted oak thrust upward through the soil of the gully wall. One of the oak's lower branches hung out over the burrow entrance and the little stream.

The plan was desperate and even a trifle ridiculous because it was such a long, long shot. It sprang full-blown into his mind in an instant. He decided to trust his instinct and go ahead, provided he still had the one bit of armament he needed—

Desperately Illya shoved the pistol into the waistband of his trousers and dug his hand beneath his belt to the utility pocket where he carried a number of items such as lock-picks, a suicide capsule and a special communicator unit shaped like a half-sized cigarette pack. Gingerly and carefully he pulled

out a small football-shaped pill.

The pill was a low-charge pressure-fused demolition device usually employed for creating a blast in a highly limited area. Such devices were valuable in blowing open a lock because the charge was concentrated. To fling such a pill back at the dog pack would have been useless; there was not enough scatter.

Buried in earth, though—Illya's eyes glittered hopefully as he charged down this side of the gully, staggered across the stream and crawled up to the entrance of the animal burrow.

Peering into that musty-smelling opening, Illya noted a pair of feral, red-gleaming animal eyes regarding him from far back in the dark. He heard a faint, rasping snarl.

A fox! What luck!

Carefully Illya bit down on the

brown pill, holding it between his teeth as he stripped off the scrofulous knee-length coat and floppy hat which had been his costume of the day. He flung these rags into the animal's den. Then he clambered up the gully-side and leaped high. He caught hold of the thick, swaying tree branch which overhung the gully wall.

His right leg throbbed. He managed to swing it up and stretch himself precariously upon the branch, which swayed like a hammock under his weight.

Across the gully, the first of the mastiffs bounded from the trees, tongue lolling, savage eyes sweeping the scene before it. The other dogs appeared almost at once. Their smooth coats shone in the dim sunlight. Their teeth gleamed like white needles.

The dogs stopped yapping. One scratched his way down the gully-side and padded across the creek, sniffing and whining. Far back in the forest there were shouts, the crashing of boots. Time was precious. The THRUSH agents would be here in a matter of moments.

The mastiffs seemed confused. They were all sniffing up and down the gully bank. The dog that had crossed the creek was growling and advancing with a twitching muzzle toward the dark circle of the burrow.

"That's it," Illya breathed. "Don't look up."

The limb upon which Illya was hanging gave a faint, horrendous crack.

Illya hung on tightly as the limb sagged perhaps a foot. There came another splintery sound. More wood gave way.

Illya wished he were sixty pounds lighter. There was nothing to be done about that now. He was hanging barely six feet above the head of the curious mastiff, absolutely immobile.

The dogs would know Illya was somewhere nearby; scent would tell them so. But he had thrown them off by pitching his clothes into the burrow. If this accursed limb only held up long enough—

With a ferocious yelp, the mastiff just below shot his muzzle into the burrow, growling savagely. Then, as though jerked by a collar-tether, the mastiff totally disappeared inside.

Illya waited for the next act in the naturalistic drama. It was not long in coming.

A yip, a sound of earth being violently disturbed, the angry barkings and snarlings of more than one animal all indicated that mastiff and fox had met.

Hearing this call to arms, the rest of the dogs shot into action. They barked and charged across the creek, and for a moment there was a considerable traffic-jam at the burrow entrance as the mastiffs all tried to squeeze inside to aid their comrade.

The last of the mastiffs finally

squirmed into the burrow, from which issued the most frightful sounds of animal ill-temper Illya Kuryakin had ever heard. He wasted no time. He pinched the brown capsule with his thumbnail to activate the pressure-fused trigger device and dropped the capsule straight down into the dirt a foot above the burrow entrance.

Suddenly a reddish projectile shot from the burrow and landed with a splash in the creek. The earth at the burrow mouth erupted in a low, smacking explosion. A cloud of white billowed, followed by a shock wave sufficient to shear off the limb where Illya hung.

Illya flailed in space and landed on all fours in the creek, sopping wet. From a flat rock a foot away a red fox with half its fur pulled out regarded him with alarm. Apparently, figuring that there had been enough surprises for one morning, the fox bounded away into the forest.

TWO

BREATHING hard, Illya picked himself up. The explosion had sealed the burrow. Wisps of smoke curled into the air; frantic barking seemed to rise from the very ground. It would give Illya the slight advantage he needed, even though Illya could still hear the THRUSH agents clattering along in the woods, getting closer.

He fought his way up the bank beside the sealed-up burrow and slipped into the forest.

The THRUSH agents would have quite a time figuring out how nine of their killer dogs had gotten sealed inside a hole in the ground which contained no U.N.C.L.E. agents.

By the time they dug the mastiffs out, Illya trusted that he would be safely hidden away somewhere. This was his immediate goal as he glided through the trees, making as little noise as possible.

His right leg still pulsed hellishly. He knew he would have to hole up soon, not only to wait for covering darkness, but to rest.

After having covered about two miles with no immediate evidence of pursuit, Illya discovered another huge oak which would offer him sufficient shelter. He dragged himself up to the second fork, folded his body awkwardly into a not-quite-comfortable position and settled down to listen.

Far off he heard barking. This gradually died away. The sun rose higher. Illya dozed.

He woke as the shadows of afternoon were lengthening. He heard a party of men passing somewhere, the renewed snarling and snapping of dogs.

He lay still as a stone among the rustling leaves.

By turning his head just a fraction he was able to catch a glimpse of the searchers—fully-armed THRUSH troopers. This time the

two mastiffs which they had with them were leashed. Such was the reward for dogs who failed.

Several tense moments passed before the search party disappeared. Evidently Illya's trail had grown cold. The forest fell silent again, save for the occasional twitter of a bird or the chirp of an insect.

The pain in Illya's right leg had begun to diminish a little. He was incredibly hungry. Satisfying the inner man would have to wait, though. He had to take up his westward course again, and try to locate Napoleon.

Wasting nearly an entire day eluding the THRUSH pursuers did not exactly put Illya in high spirits. There was no telling what had happened to Napoleon during that time.

But there was nothing to be done about it. He wouldn't have gotten this far if he hadn't holed up in the tree to avoid discovery.

At sunset Illya climbed down. He walked cautiously, shivering in the night's coolness.

About an hour later, Illya nearly stumbled across a light beam running between two photo-cells set facing one another in two large tree trunks. His pulses quickened. He bellied down. Carefully he slid beneath the photo-beam and jumped up on the other side.

Warning devices built into tree trunks meant that he was nearly to the target.

Pressing on, Illya thought for the first time since the preceding night about the girl with whom Napoleon had had a date. What was her name? Helen? No, Helene. A German last name. Bauer, that was it. Was she too a prisoner of the unspeakable minions of THRUSH? That would teach her to listen to Napoleon's sweet nothings.

The cynical thought did nothing to cheer him up. As he crept on through the forest suffused with blood-colored sunset light, he still had the depressing conviction that he might be much too late to save his friend.

Presently he heard a sound. It happened only seconds before his keen eyes picked out something ahead which resembled a high stone wall.

Illya advanced to a large tree near the wall. Looking to the left, he saw by the feeble light of evening a large gate guarded by a pair of oversized THRUSH troopers lounging near a booth. This, he realized with a tightening of his nerves, was the place.

THREE

THE SOUND which had assaulted his ears took on definition. Voices, many of them, sharp and in unison. The voices chanted some kind of cadence count.

Then Illya recognized the language.

German.

"Ein. Zwei. Drei! Vier! Ein! Zwei! Drei! Vier!"

What made the chant chilling was the savage way the syllables were shouted out. The voices from the other side of the high wall belonged to women.

Drawing back into the trees, he began to work his way around to the right. He was sure the wall itself would be rigged with personnel detection devices. He decided that he would make a complete circle of the wall to judge its length. Then, if no other means of entrance presented itself, he would make an attempt on the front gate, risky as it might be.

In moments Illya reached the corner of the wall. He peered down the side of the square which ran westward, at a right angle to the front expanse. Trees completely ringed the property, affording him cover as he worked along all the way to the wall's rear corner. There he paused once more to reconnoiter.

The cadence-count had grown much louder. Whatever the women were doing, they were doing it near this rear part of the grounds. A kind of postern gate appeared to be set in the back wall about half way along. A THRUSH soldier walked up and down laconically, a machine pistol slung over his shoulder.

Illya's nerves tightened another notch. He crept along through the underbrush until he was opposite the postern gate, an ancient metal affair with new hinges and polished locking mechanism.

Carefully Illya palmed his long-muzzled pistol, giving one screw turn to the barrel to snap the silencing baffles in place. He set another control on the butt to feed the proper projectiles to the chamber. Then, with his left hand, he picked up a small stone and lobbed it high against the wall, to the left of where the THRUSH minion was examining his knuckles in a preoccupied way.

The pebble struck. The guard whipped around toward it. Illya lunged from the trees. He dropped to one knee and carefully pulled the trigger.

With a pop the pistol jerked in Illya's hand. The THRUSH guard opened his mouth to scream, slapped his neck. His eyes turned milky as the serum on the tranquilizing dart raced to his brain. Giving a feeble murmur, the guard folded to the ground, out for twelve hours.

Quickly Illya dragged the man into the trees. He yanked off the THRUSH uniform and hastily donned the oversized blouse and trousers. Next he stuffed some leaves in the crown of the too-large visored cap so that it wouldn't slip down over his ears.

He approached the metal postern, rapping it smartly with the butt of his pistol and stepping to the right when the bolt rattled. The door opened from inside.

"Ein! Zwei! Drei! Vier! Ein! Zwei! Drei! Vier—!"

The massed female voices continued to shout out the cadence beyond the wall. In the crack of the postern door, a misshapen face loomed. The THRUSH soldier looking out was another of those grotesque, slab-shouldered types. Illya jammed the pistol muzzle against the man's neck and triggered once.

Like a bull the man reared backward, reaching for a red-painted lever affixed to a klaxon. His eyes were already glazed but he was falling in such a way that if his hand missed the lever, his body would fall across it. Illya dived forward frantically and shoved the THRUSH man aside.

The guard went down with a groan, fingertips missing the klaxon lever by a matter of an inch.

The THRUSH man thudded onto the wooden floor of a little guard booth which was built against the high wall directly inside the massive postern door.

Illya slammed and bolted the door and then examined his surroundings more carefully.

The booth was constructed of steel. There was a window wicket in the door which led from the booth to a floodlit parade ground outside.

On this parade ground, three dozen incredibly tall and attractive young women, all in black jumpers, trousers and boots, were lined

up doing calisthenics as the white glare of the floodlights poured down upon them in the twilight.

Beyond the parade ground towered what appeared to be an ancient baronial hall with several sprawling wings. Many of its windows were alight.

With a final lusty *"Vier!"* the exercises came to a halt. The ranks of superbly-muscled young women drew up to stiff attention. In front of them another girl with an electric megaphone was cracking out instructions in German. Illya couldn't quite see all of the girl's face, but something about it was hauntingly familiar.

As soon as the girl in command finished her harangue, the amazons drew themselves up even more stiffly, shot their right arms into the air palm outward and cried:

Heil THRUSH!"

Illya's belly turned over with nausea. He had certainly come to the right place.

In twos and threes the girls broke ranks and moved toward the great baronial house. None dawdled. They moved out with long, determined strides.

Now the instructress, likewise clad entirely in black, with a wide black leather belt around her waist, was moving in the direction of the wall. Evidently she intended to stow the electric megaphone in a kind of hut or equipment locker built against the wall to Illya's left. At last Illya recognized the blonde tresses, the pretty whipped-cream face—

The last time he had seen that face, the girl had been serving refreshments aboard an Air Deutschland jet.

Illya hefted his pistol and, keeping his head down, opened the inner door of the booth. He closed it smartly and began walking along a path of stones toward the equipment shed, on a course which would intersect the girl's.

All of the girls had now departed from the floodlit field. The sky above was black. The first stars were glittering. But he and the girl were bathed in the blue-white glare of the spots.

Quickly Illya transferred his weapon to his left hand, the side nearest the wall, in case any watch-stations up at the big house had them under surveillance. The girl had reached the hut. She opened its door to stow her megaphone inside. She glanced at him once and then glanced away, assuming him to be just another guard on some errand or other. Illya moved close enough to call out softly:

"Good evening, Fraulein Bauer."

Her head whipped up. Her blue eyes narrowed and far shone out. Illya remained standing right where he was, pistol angled up alongside his left thigh so that it pointed at her bosom.

"Kuryakin!" Helen Bauer's fingers dropped toward a knife sheath at her belt.

"Leave the knife where it is, please," Illya said, keeping a smile pasted on his face in the unlikely event that they were being surveyed through field-glasses.

Helene's fingers tensed just inches from the knife hilt. Indecision and fear shone on her face as she hesitated.

"If you are thinking about raising an alarm," Illya said, strolling forward at an easy pace, his teeth bared in that fake grin but his voice deadly quiet, "I would advise against it. Perhaps your comrades could reach us and capture or kill me. But before they did, I assure you I would disregard your sex and shoot you."

The girl hesitated only a moment longer. Her shoulders slumped. "All right."

"I thought I might find you a prisoner, Fraulein. Apparently, however, you are one of the clutchers. I don't exactly know what pret-

ty plots you're hatching at this school for savage-looking female storm troopers—"

"Let them get their hands on you, Kuryakin, and you'll discover you don't know the meaning of the word savage!"

He said, "Mustn't lose your temper just because I'm one up."

"For the moment. Only for the moment."

"No," Illya corrected, his face no longer friendly. "For as long as you wish to remain alive, Fraulein Bauer. I will not hesitate because you are a woman. U.N.C.L.E. does train us rather thoroughly in such matters, you know. Now—is Napoleon Solo here?"

Helene Bauer bit her lip. She glanced away, as though searching for help. The parade ground stretched empty and flood-lit. The girl seemed unable to make up her mind as to whether Illya's threats were serious.

To reinforce his psychological advantage, he thumbed a stud on the pistol-butt. An ominous ticking began. He said lightly:

"I have just set my pistol on automatic timed discharge, Fraulein. If you have not answered my question at the end of sixty seconds, the gun will begin firing straight at you. To repeat—is Napoleon Solo here?"

The ticking continued steadily. A nightbird cried in the forest.

Tickticktictktick—

Suddenly the girl wilted, shielding her eyes with her right hand. "Turn it off."

"Not until you answer me."

"He's here." She whipped her hand down, her face a changing pattern of fear, doubt, anxiety. "But what time is it?" She glanced at a small stainless steel watch on her wrist. "Ten past seven already. He may no longer be alive."

Illya flicked off the stud. The pistol ceased its relentless tick.

"What does the time have to do with Napoleon Solo being alive or dead?"

"My father Dr. Bauer is in charge of the scientific project at this station. By means of his enzymatic ray process he is increasing the strength and physical capabilities of a select group of THRUSH shock troops so that—"

"Yes, yes," Illya said impatiently. "We saw Klaanger. Get to the point. Where is Napoleon?"

"In my father's laboratory. There."

Helene indicated the sprawling building. Rapidly she explained the experiment which Dr. Bauer had been intending to perform.

"Solo went under the reversing ray early this morning when I first brought him in from Munich. But just as the equipment was turned on, a transmitter overloaded and blew out. Technicians had to work in the lab all day to make the proper repairs. Your Mr. Solo gained a slight reprieve. He has been locked in a cell all day today. My father

re-scheduled the experiment for seven this evening."

Illya's heart began to slug faster in his chest. "Then we have no time to lose."

"I can't help it if it's already too late, Kuryakin."

"For your sake, my dear," Illya replied, "I hope it is not. Now quickly. Fall into place beside me. Here, on my left side. We are going to walk side by side across the parade ground and into your headquarters. You will take me directly to the laboratory. I will have my pistol pointed at your pretty ribs every second. I will fire at the first outcry. Are you ready?"

Looking rather scared for a superwoman, Helene Bauer nodded.

Illya felt perspiration trickling down the back of his neck. The parade ground was huge, giving him a feeling of isolation, of being a clear target. Helene Bauer's sibilant breathing sounded loudly in his left ear.

It seemed to be taking forever to reach the house.

"Walk faster," he whispered.

Helene quickened her stride. They passed a number of dun-gray halftrack vehicles with machine guns mounted on swivels in their rear beds. They reached a concrete walk which led to a rear entrance to the house.

Under a feeble shielded light, a THRUSH soldier snapped to attention.

Illya's mind raced. Was Solo alive? Or was the hour already too late?

Illya held the door. They stepped into a foyer walled in stainless steel. His heart hammered in his chest. The first peril was past.

But how many more lay ahead?

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO had the eerie feeling that he had been here before. And indeed he had been, for he was again strapped down to Herr Doktor Klaus Bauer's thickly padded table.

More than twelve hours had passed since Bauer's assistants manhandled him onto the table. He was no closer now to a way of escape from this devil's den of goose-steppers and THRUSH agents than he had been then. If anything, he was further away.

"Patience, patience, Solo," Bauer said as he came within Solo's range of vision, bustling from one control console to another. "Don't writhe so. It's useless."

Bauer paused long enough to peer down at Solo. His eyes rolled behind his rimless glasses. His round pate shone like a new egg under the fluorescent glare of the ceiling lights. A thin film of spittle appeared on his up-curled lips as he contemplated his victim.

Solo was now clad in loose, overstarched gray prison trousers and shirt, black socks and clumsy angle-high prisoner's boots.

As Bauer's face swam close, Solo realized again that the man, though brilliant, was certainly unbalanced. He recalled Bauer's almost womanish sobs and shrieks this morning, when the transmitter had overloaded and blown out, thus granting Solo his brief reprieve.

"I trust the day-long wait has not aggravated your nerves, Solo?" Bauer clucked.

"Not much," Solo barked back. Cold perspiration trickled down his right cheek. In truth the day of anticipation had done just that, tightened his nerves almost unbearably.

After being removed from the table that morning in the smoke and confusion following the power failure, Solo had been stripped, searched—a formality neglected upon his arrival, due to Bauer's extreme haste—and then given his prisoner's garb. He was thrown into a cheerless, windowless cement cell. There, without a weapon or, seemingly, a prayer of getting out, he had languished throughout the day until THRUSH soldiers fetched him at ten before seven this evening.

"We won't have to wait much longer now," Bauer grinned.

"There's no need to fake a lot of civilized behavior, Herr Doktor. I know you too well."

Bauer's eyebrows shot up. "But this is nothing personal, Herr Solo!"

"Maybe with you it's not."

"This is all in the cause of science!"

"Or the cause of a little Bavarian madman who butchered women and children?"

Dr. Bauer's face lost its comic-opera look. He leaned down and very nearly spat in Napoleon Solo's face.

"For that filthy remark, I hope the process reduces you to a boneless, witless lump of—" He lapsed into a stream of vile German words.

One of his assistants tugged his sleeve, nervously indicating the clock high up on the wall. Bauer flushed and recovered himself. With a last hateful glance at Solo he rushed off.

Click-*click*.

Snap-*snick*.

The deep hummings began.

Overhead, the black lens in the center of the stainless steel ball glowed and pulsed, glowed and pulsed—

"Power drain, Hermann?" Bauer called somewhere.

"Normal, Herr Doktor."

"Splendid, splendid! Throw the lever. Increase to the third increment—"

A low metal *spang* indicated that the lever had been thrown over. Solo's extremities began to tingle oddly. The pulsing blue halation which surrounded the steel ball hurt his eyes. This was unforgivable! He shouldn't be trapped this way, giving up his life without even having had the chance to no-

tify U.N.C.L.E. If only Illya had somehow gotten through—

"Increase to the fifth increment!" Dr. Bauer called above the rising dynamo hum.

The bluish light began to make Solo's eyes dance with painful colored dots. His entire body gave a violent spasm, as though some strange transformation were taking place within his cellular structure. A second spasm followed. He would have fallen off the table and been injured had not the restraining straps been so tight.

Solo clenched his teeth. Another peculiar pain started, this one seeming to come from the deepest marrow of his bones. He bit down on his lower lip to choke back a cry of agony as the bluish light blazed, *blazed*—

Sensations smacked against his eyes and ears in confusing, overlapping sequence:

A heavy metal door hissed and rocked open with a clang.

At the same time a girl squeaked out a frightened yell which ended with a sudden gasp of breath, as though her warning cry had been aborted by a quick, ungentlemanly punch in the ribs.

Then, through a chorus of German cursing, Solo heard a voice he recognized:

"Napoleon? Napoleon—"

"Illya!" Solo was unable to twist his head and see his friend.

"I will kill anyone in this chamber who moves," Illya called.

The bluish light blinded Solo. Even the stainless steel ball directly above him was hidden. The ache in the marrow of his bones intensified to a point of near-unbearable agony. Somehow he managed to summon strength to yell in a croaking voice:

"Illya? Make them—turn the machine off."

"Turn it off," Illya ordered.

"Nein, nein!" Bauer exclaimed hoarsely. "Manfred, throw the alarm switch—"

Footsteps hammered. Illya shouted another warning. Evidently it was disobeyed. Illya's pistol cracked flatly once. A man screamed.

As Solo remembered, there were no THRUSH soldiers stationed in the laboratory chamber, only research men. Evidently Illya had them under the gun and they were not of a mind to disobey his orders. Silence fell.

But Bauer wasn't happy with the situation.

"Do not touch the power-down control, Wolfgang! If you value your life, do not—"

"Wolfgang—" Illya said harshly.

Wolfgang apparently had a different view of his life's worth. There came the solid ka-*thunk* of a large control being slammed home. At once the power hum of the dynamo receded. The bluish light began to fade.

The marrow-hurting pain in Solo's bones waned. In a moment,

after a flurry of footfalls, Illya's face appeared just above his, white, anxious. A knife blade flickered. Illya slashed at the straps. Seconds later Solo sat up and stretched his creaking muscles.

He wasted no words of thanks. They were in a serious situation and he had to move fast. Solo's eyes swept the chamber.

Dr. Bauer and his technicians were grouped around the control-board consoles, tense with fear. On the low balcony other THRUSH lab men had frozen by their instruments.

Near wide open double doors leading to a stainless steel corridor, Helene Bauer was just picking herself up. She shook her head groggily.

"I am not quite certain as to what is happening here, Napoleon," Illya whispered.

Dr. Bauer stared hatefully at the pistol in Illya's fist. "You can't escape."

"That remains to be seen, sir." From the corner of his mouth Illya hissed at his friend, "I had to hit the girl when she screamed. If we reach her before she fully recovers, we can use her as I used her to get in here—for cover."

Solo nodded. He pointed overhead at the stainless steel ball. "First we've got to wreck that thing. It's Bauer's ray for creating his supermen—"

Illya grasped the situation instantly. He raised his pistol over his head. "Watch them, Napoleon. Here's my knife. Take it." With his gun turned toward the stainless steel ball he squinted up the muzzle over the sight—

Klaus Bauer let out another hysterical scream of rage and flung himself forward. Solo darted in to block the man's charge with his body so that Illya could get off his shot.

The shot never came.

Something flickered in the corner of Solo's eye. Bauer crashed into him, flailing and digging at Solo's face with savage fingernails. Illya heard noises, whirled around, precisely at the instant when an entire section of concrete block wall on the balcony shot upward to reveal Vanessa Robin and Felix Klaanger charging down a slanting corridor into the chamber with THRUSH troops pounding at their heels.

ACT IV
PICK A ROCK, ANY ROCK— OR DIE

VANESSA ROBIN'S slanted green eyes were raging as she flung up a rapid-fire pistol and began to blaze away. Solo and Illya threw themselves to the concrete. Streaks of white fire ate toward them, chewing holes in the padding of the big table.

"Crawl toward the right," Solo said. "They'll fan out all around us in a couple of seconds. We'll be

caught if we don't reach that door soon—"

Illya nodded, cheeks chalk-white as he took aim and fired. A THRUSH soldier climbing down over the balcony rail jerked his arms straight up in the air and toppled. Blood spouted from a bullet hole in the side of his neck.

"Deploy, deploy!" Felix Klaanger bawled, gesturing with a rifle. "Encircle them, you idiots!"

Klaanger was crouching behind a concrete support post at the balcony's edge. Vanessa was right beside him. Her face was vengeful, but Klaanger's was even worse, a nightmare face with its gigantic wreck of a nose. Illya scrambled to his feet alongside Solo and tried a shot. Klaanger's bulbous, lemon-shaped head disappeared, unscathed.

The entire laboratory was now a pandemonium of shots, curses in German, shrieked orders and counter-orders. Solo and Illya raced full tilt for the doors through which Helene Bauer had led Illya only moments ago. Helene too was crouching on the balcony, seeking cover from the deadly crossfire. The U.N.C.L.E. agents zigzagged through the maze of control consoles, ducking , bending, twisting—

Solo felt a slug pluck his left sleeve. Another chunked against Illya's flying left heel, dug out a section and spent itself on the concrete floor. They were five yards from the balcony and the doors.

Three yards.

Two—

Just ahead, Dr. Klaus Bauer loomed up. Somehow he had gotten around in front of them. Shrieking wildly, he launched himself from the balcony rail and landed on top of Napoleon, knocking him to the ground.

Over and over they tumbled. The scientist had gone berserk. His nails dug and clawed at Solo's neck. His knee slammed violently into Solo's groin, bringing intense pain. Solo lost all his scruples about hurting an older man and gave Bauer a wild bashing elbow in the midsection.

Bauer's glasses slipped off and he groaned. But he managed to hang on to Solo's throat as Solo staggered to his feet, literally dragging Bauer up after him.

Illya had leaped up to the balcony rail, was hanging there by one hand. He sniped at the THRUSH soldiers who were creeping forward behind cover of the various consoles.

Violently Solo twisted, trying to shake Bauer off. For brief seconds, the white-coated back of Dr. Klaus Bauer was turned toward the center of the chamber. A rapid-fire pistol stuttered.

Dr. Bauer began to jiggle and sway like a marionette. Inches from Solo's face, his mouth sagged open. The light of life dimmed in his eyes. His hands slipped free of Solos' throat. Slowly he cork-

screwed to the floor. The back of the little man's lab coat was singed black, and stitched back and forth with a pattern of holes left by high-powered bullets.

On the far side of the chamber Vanessa Robin leaned on the top of the concrete support post. Smoke curled from the barrel of the rapid-fire pistol in her right hand.

Solo quickly became conscious of two things: the totally callous and inhuman way Vanessa Robin had murdered Bauer to get at him, and a sound behind and to his left —low feminine sobbing.

And then an hysterical scream tore out:

"Papa! Dear God—Papa!"

Helene Bauer plunged down off the railing and crawled along until she had her dead father's head in her lap. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She cried to Vanessa, "Why did you murder him? He was on your side!"

Voice colder than cold, Vanessa called back, "It's Solo and Kuryakin we want. Your father lost his senses. He got in the way. Besides we didn't need him any longer. He had done most of his work, after all."

Helene Bauer's face filled with hatred for a moment. Then her shoulders convulsed with sobs. She bent over her father's mutilated corpse, swaying back and forth.

All this took place in a space of seconds. Napoleon Solo realized abruptly that the THRUSH soldiers were still creeping forward, rifles glinting as they scurried from machine to machine. He had the unpleasant feeling that Vanessa Robin had already issued orders that he and Illya were not to be killed.

He whirled, jumped, caught the top of the balcony rail, pulled himself up—

And found himself looking down the barrel of an automatic rifle held in the misshapen hands of a THRUSH soldier.

While Solo had struggled with Bauer, other THRUSH soldiers had rushed into the stainless steel corridor which had been their hoped-for escape route. These soldiers jammed the balcony now. Two had overpowered Illya from behind. One had a murderous elbow crooked around Illya's throat. The other held a rifle against his side.

Illya Kuryakin was disarmed, caught, his face a mask of disgust.

Solo stayed right where he was, breathing sibilantly. His first sudden movement would bring a THRUSH bullet crashing into his body.

The soldiers fanned out around him as Vanessa Robin broke from cover on the far balcony and raced across the floor of the laboratory. In a moment they were face to face:

"You very nearly made it, didn't you, Solo?" Her cheeks were mottled red as she towered over him, staring down furiously.

"Next time we will," Solo said, with considerable false bravado.

Vanessa shook her head. Her shoulder-length blonde hair glittered with cold highlights. "No next time for you or for Kuryakin. You have caused us quite enough trouble already. As station chief I am authorizing your execution."

Felix Klaanger, resplendent in a THRUSH officer's uniform with black and red epaulets, had lumbered up behind her. His grotesque face shone with sadistic joy as he said, "Allow me the pleasure, Freulein Robin." He cracked the knuckles of his right hand, a loud, popping sound. "Allow me to dispatch them."

Vanessa pondered. "No, General, I think not."

Klaanger's face became, if possible, even more ugly. "I demand that you—"

Vanessa Robin slapped him smartly across the nose. Klaanger howled.

"That's the trouble with you, Klaanger. You always *demand.* Every time you want something, you *demand.* This is not the headquarters of the German High Command. This is a THRUSH station and I am in charge."

She made a mock-pout, but from the wicked gleam in her green eyes it was clear that she was playing with Klaanger, and disciplining him at the same time:

"If you spoke to me in polite language—but no. This time I can't grant your request, General. Perhaps you'll learn your lesson."

Klaanger flushed deep red. The THRUSH soldiers muttered among themselves, obviously pleased at this effective display of authority by their superior. Vanessa tickled Solo's chin with a long scarlet fingernail.

"Besides, General," she said, "I think they'll have a delightful time in the pit."

Illya glowered. "Did you say the pit, Miss Robin?"

"Oh," said Vanessa, "so you know me too?"

"One doesn't have to see a skunk to recognize it. The smell is—"

Vanessa smacked Illya with her oversized fist, nearly upsetting his guards as well. Instantly she struggled to compose herself. She took a deep breath, said:

"We can all benefit from a little relaxation. This has been a most taxing day." Blithe again, she snapped her fingers. Soldiers hustled to seize Solo.

"You can at least do us the courtesy of telling us what the pit is," he said.

"Oh, just a place that the barons who once lived here used for rebellious subjects."

"What kind of place?" Illya inquired.

Vanessa's white teeth sparkled as she smiled. "A lovely place with an observation window we've built in. A place where my associates and I can relax and have a high-

ball and watch the two of you put on an amusing show while you die. Bring them along, both of them. And quickly!"

TWO

THE PIT, as Napoleon Solo and Illya soon found to their dismay, had absolutely sheer sides. It was a perfect cylinder, illuminated by a single light high up in the solid stone ceiling.

That ceiling was at least twenty feet above the tightly-packed dirt floor on which they found themselves unceremoniously dumped by their THRUSH captors. Immediately the steel portal through which they had been pushed clanged shut. They heard the *pong* of electric bolts ramming home. Opposite, they saw a similar steel port, also closed. It was barely three feet tall, and twice as wide as the regular door.

While Solo speculated upon what noxious poison fumes would probably come curling in upon them, Illya walked round and round the base of the cylinder. The pit was constructed entirely of ancient and faintly damp blocks of stone.

"Very exciting so far," Solo said.

"Don't make jokes, please."

"What else can I do? Yell for a Boy Scout to lend assistance?"

"It's a thought." Dourly Illya contemplated their surroundings. "If it hadn't been for Dr. Bauer catching you the way he did, we might have made it."

"Well, we didn't make it. So now we have to figure a way out of here."

A somber silence fell. The two U.N.C.L.E. agents had worked together long enough to know that false high spirits weren't going to help now.

Solo paced. So did Illya. Behind the smaller steel door they heard a peculiar snuffling or coughing.

Abruptly, amplified tinnily through a speaker, they heard Vanessa Robin say:

"Please don't stop the brittle conversation, gentlemen. We were enjoying it no end."

Illya and Solo snapped around, craned upward. An entire section of the stone block wall had slid aside to reveal a thick safety-glass window about six feet wide. The curved window was recessed into the wall of the pit about three feet over their heads.

Beyond the window, Vanessa Robin and Felix Klaanger lifted their right hands in a mock toast. Each held a dark brown highball. Lesser THRUSH lights crowded up behind them to watch the spectacle. The U.N.C.L.E. agents stood their ground and glared.

"Well," came Vanessa's voice again, "I suppose we might as well start the show if you've both run out of epigrams." She reached out to touch a control hidden by the window's edge.

The short steel panel behind them shot aside. They saw a dark stone tunnel from which issued that unusual coughing, plus a decidedly gamy animal smell.

"I must tell you," Vanessa said, "that we keep the poor creature on a starvation diet just for occasions such as this. It will be interesting to see which one of you he selects for his first course—"

Crouching against the curved wall opposite the tunnel mouth, Napoleon Solo saw a pair of shining eyes regarding him with what appeared to be hunger. "Good Lord," he breathed as the thing's claws ticked on the stone and it lumbered forward into the pit—an immense, barrel-shaped, club-headed Bavarian brown bear with a wet black snout and dripping white fangs.

Illya Kuryakin looked at the monster and flattened his back against the wall.

"Try not to attract his attention," he whispered.

Both agents remained motionless. The bear lumbered one step forward, then another. It wagged its immense head from side to side, its large, brown, dumb eyes fixed on a point just between the two agents. It became obvious that the bear had located its prey.

The long, lolling red tongue shot out. The bear licked its chops. With a deep growl it began to stalk forward again.

When it had reached the midway point in the dirt floor, it paused. Then, ponderously, it swung its head to the right until its snout was pointing directly at Solo.

"If it lunges at me," Solo whispered, "you go out through the tunnel."

"Impossible," Vanessa's voice blared over the speaker. "There are thick bars, and a guard, at the other end."

Solo swallowed hard. The bear advanced again, baring its fangs. Illya was leaning down slowly, very slowly. Very carefully he dug the fingers of his right hand into the dirt.

Solo started to circle to the left around the wall, also slowly. The bear changed course, its huge foot pads making marks in the dirt. Abruptly, with a slavering roar, it lunged forward.

Napoleon Solo dodged wildly to the left. Not fast enough! The furry monster crashed against him, flattening him in the dirt.

Horrible weight crushed down on top of him as he tried to roll out from under. The bear snarled and bit at his head. Solo wrenched his head savagely to one side to avoid the bite.

The bear growled ferociously. Drool dripped off its tongue on to Solo's forehead. The bear dipped its head again to bite, and just at that second Illya darted in and flung a handful of stinging dirt into the creature's eyes.

Startled, the bear automatically

chomped its jaws shut. Solo dragged his left arm out of the path of those murderous teeth and ripped himself to the right, out from under. The bear snapped blindly at him, tearing his shirt and leaving painful teeth marks that oozed blood on his left forearm. From the loudspeaker came a mocking patter of applause.

The bear gathered itself on all fours, shook its immense shoulders as Solo carefully backed away from it. There was, unfortunately, no place to run. Next time, Solo knew, he might not be so lucky.

With another mighty growl the bear leaped. Napoleon Solo dodged to one side. His left foot skidded in the dirt. He went down to one knee. The bear charged straight at his head, slavering jaws opening wide and wet and red.

Chommmp! The jaws shut, snatching out of mid-air a scarlet something which, incredibly, had sailed out of the mouth of the tunnel.

Now the bear tore at this, worrying it back and forth. Another, similar item sailed into the pit. Then two more.

Solo watched the bear go wild and attempt to ingest all four huge, succulent raw slabs of meat into its maw at once. There was a hiss from the tunnel.

Overhead, Vanessa Robin and Klaanger and the others shouted and cursed. Content with a less-than-human meal, bruin was sitting on his haunches, masticating bone, gristle and meat with loud crunching sounds. And on hands and knees inside the tunnel, her cheeks and knuckles smeared with meat juice, was the person who had called to them and tossed the meat in to save them.

"I stabbed the guard and—unlocked the bars," Helene Bauer panted. "I didn't know whether I could get here in time with the meat. I stole it from the kitchens. Hurry, the bear is nearly finished —"And she backed hastily down the tunnel.

Illya's face lit with hope. "Don't stand on ceremony, for heaven's sake!" He dove into the tunnel on all fours.

Solo followed immediately. Over the loudspeaker, Vanessa Robin shrieked in rage. An alarm klaxon began to scream; alerting the entire garrison to the attempted escape.

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO banged his skull, shins and elbows as he crawled along the gamy-smelling tunnel with all possible speed. Illya reached the tunnel's end and tumbled out on to a ramp which ran down from the tunnel to the floor of a small cement-block room. Half of one of the other walls was the entrance to the bear's cage. A large section of bars had been slid aside, and a musky effluvium of straw and droppings floated from the dark place beyond.

On the floor of the small chamber sprawled the THRUSH animal handler, an electric prod in his lifeless fingers and a short kitchen knife projecting from his throat.

"Not very neat," Illya commented. "But let's not quibble."

Helene was trembling, obviously struggling to keep her fear under control. "I—I've never killed anyone before—"

"What happened? I thought you were one of the chief lady storm troopers of the Fourth Reich," Solo grunted as he unbent himself on the ramp outside the tunnel. He reached up and slammed a switch which lowered the bars into place. Behind, in the pit, the klaxon still howled.

Helene gave a quick, uncertain nod. "I thought I believed it. I pretended to be as tough as the next. But I've never killed. Not until now." Her head lifted. All the explanation the two U.N.C.L.E. agents needed was contained in the furious blaze of her eyes and the bitter way she said, "When that woman shot Papa, as if he were nothing, nothing but a lump of mud —everything changed. I had to strike back at them."

"We'd better get moving," Illya warned. "How do we get out of here?"

"The main gate of the estate is heavily guarded," the girl said.

Solo's eyes crinkled down to worried slits. "And the troops will be out in force."

Illya said, "I left two THRUSH fellows sleeping at another gate on the far side of the parade ground."

"Then let's try that, "Solo said. "Helene, lead on."

The girl's wide black leather belt caught dull reflections from the ceiling lights as she spun around and unbolted an iron door. "This stairway leads up to a delivery passageway."

In the distance boots slammed. Other klaxons picked up the bleating *ooogah-ooogah* of the first. With Helene racing beside them, the two U.N.C.L.E. agents took the steps upward two at a time.

Solo was strangely conscious of the jaws of a trap closing unseen somewhere around them. His palms ran with cold sweat. Like a warning, the outraged bellow of the frustrated bear drifted after them.

They reached a feebly-lit landing.

"Here is the entrance to the delivery passageway," Helene whispered. She pressed her hands against a steel door patterned with rivets. Illya put his shoulder against it to help her roll it aside. Solo peered out.

To the left, a high, wide concrete passage ran back to double doors with round glass portholes blacked out with paint. To the right the passage opened on to what appeared to be a loading dock. A small, nondescript van was backed up to the dock. Beyond this vehicle Solo glimpsed the flood-lit parade

ground, curiously green empty, silent. In the far distance the wall reared up.

"Decidedly peculiar," Illya whispered.

Even pitched low, his voice bounced eerily from the walls of the delivery passage. A field mouse nibbling at a wilted brown lettuce leaf inside a produce crate was the only living thing visible anywhere in the passage. The mouse raised its head, wiggled its nose, blinked its small ruby-colored eyes at them and bounded away into the thick-clustered shadows.

"Peculiar," Illya repeated. "No noise now. The klaxons have stopped. I should think Miss Robin and her cohorts would be boxing us in by remote control, locking every single door in the place until we were trapped."

"Maybe they're watching us on scanners,' Solo suggested.

Illya chewed his lip. There were large circles of fatigue under his eyes. "Shall we see? They took my weapons away when they caught me, but evidently they thought they were leaving me my cigarettes."

From his pants pocket Illya pulled a gaudily-printed cigarette package. He flicked his thumbnail against the top. The lid popped open on a spring; the communicator was meticulously disguised with foil paper and cellophane.

"Napoleon," Illya said as he set a recessed control stud, "in the event that we don't get out alive, we should make certain that this little corner of the THRUSH empire ceases to function."

Solo understood.

He gave a bleak nod. Illya breathed, "Open Channel D, please. Extreme priority, class triple-A red."

In a moment there came a measured voice:

"Alexander Waverly here."

"Kuryakin, sir."

"Mr. Kuryakin! Good heavens, I've been worrying about you for hours!"

"We've managèd to stay alive so far, sir. How much longer we can do so is problematical."

Mr. Waverly went *hmmm*. "That serious, eh? Where are you?"

"Somewhere in the Schwarzwald, sir. I can't give you the exact coordinates. We're trapped inside the research station where THRUSH is manufacturing its Goliaths. We may or may not be able to get all the way out."

"Mr. Solo is there with you?"

"Yes, sir."

Static crackled for a few seconds as Mr. Waverly digested the news. In a more somber tone he said, "Please put Solo on."

Illya passed the small unit to his friend. When Solo had acknowledged, Waverly asked, "Mr. Solo, as senior Operations and Enforcement officer on this mission, what is your assessment of the threat posed by the THRUSH operation you have penetrated?"

Solo licked his lips. The words were difficult to say:

"Grave, sir. Just as we feared, these agents they're turning out—both men and women—are incredible." Solo avoided Illya's eyes. "We called in to recommend action, sir. A bomber strike. As quickly as it can be arranged. I can switch this unit to a homing frequency to guide them in."

Mr. Waverly coughed. "What is your personal situation as of this moment, Mr. Solo?"

In a few words Solo explained their predicament. Waverly was silent a second. Then:

"You may not be able to escape by the time the planes arrive. I have just consulted our system maps. According to my rough calculation, as soon as I flash the request overseas through London, a fighter-bomber squadron already airborne will be on its way. Perhaps a matter of ten minutes at supersonic speeds until they arrive."

Solo's temples hurt. Helene watched him with round, horrified eyes. Solo tried to keep his emotions out of play. He tried to remember that all of his professional training had pointed to this moment—the moment when an U.N.C.L.E. agent had to make the last, hardest decision and place his own life and the life of others secondary to the preservation of the United Network Command.

It still wasn't an easy decision to make. Solo thought of the many pleasures he enjoyed. Good wine. The aroma of freshly-broiled lobster. The raspberry tang of a girl's lips—

"Send in the strike, sir," he said.

Mr. Waverly said, "Good luck and God speed, Mr. Solo. Over and out."

The communicator went silent. And the clock began to run out for the three of them.

FOUR

SOLO HAD SWITCHED to the proper channel. The communicator was now sending its homing signal into the sky, where it would be picked up at a range of fifty miles by the squadron of fighter-bombers that would soon be flashing in.

"All right," he said in a strained voice. "Let's make the most of the time we've got."

The three of them broke for the mouth of the tunnel. Their heels clacked loudly. Still the entire THRUSH estate was shrouded in a weird stillness. Solo emerged onto the loading dock. He cut to the left. Illya and Helene crowded up behind. Ahead, the green grass of the parade ground moved gently under a night breeze.

The tall floodlight stanchions shed a sharp radiance onto the empty expanse of turf. Solo dropped to the asphalt below the dock, helped Helene down.

Illya's eyes flicked from left to right and back again, hunting for

signs of the trap which surely existed.

Solo edged his way around a parked lorry. He wished that he had a pistol, any kind of weapon.

The parade ground was wide, green, empty. And it looked like a journey of a thousand miles to that small booth which Illya pointed out on the far wall.

"Ready?" Solo asked.

Illya nodded, wiped a trickle of sweat from his chin.

Solo half-turned. "Helene?"

"I can make it."

With a quick bob of his head, Solo started running. The other two came right behind.

Their feet thudded softly on the turf as they charged toward the far wall. At any moment Solo expected to hear the stutter of machineguns from the high cornices of the great house. The wind keened eerily in his ears as he ran. Breath pumped in and out of his lungs.

He flashed a look back over his shoulder. Lights blazed in the curtained windows of the upper floors of the great house, but nowhere was there another human being moving.

They had safely crossed about a quarter of the distance to the booth in the wall.

Abruptly the trap sprang open behind them—literally out of the ground.

Whole sections of the sodded parade ground flipped upward. The turf was imitation, laid down atop hinged steel plates like square manhole covers. The night was suddenly filled with an incredible, wordless shrieking as up from the underground warrens surged the black-uniformed THRUSH girls, tall, hate-faced, their hair streaming.

Their voices were raised in that chilling unison shriek of hate. Gun barrels winked. Boots shone. A dozen of them had come up through the sprung-back ports in the grass now.

Two dozen.

Three.

They fanned out and formed a long line, a human chain of women. From the parapets of the baronial hall, searchlights blinked on. Solo and his friends, running wildly, were pinned inside great white circles of brilliant light.

An automatic pistol stuttered. Illya gave a sharp cry and went down, blood blackening the left leg of his trousers.

Helene doubled back to help him. Solo had the feeling that he'd take a bullet any second too. Through the stillness the unison chant of hate was drying out. The echo of the pistol burst was spun away on the breeze.

Like a sharp knife slicing through cheese, Vanessa Robin boomed over a bullhorn:

"No firing! *No firing!* Hold your fire until further signals are given!"

Solo twisted around, bent to pull Illya to his feet. Illya had gone pale. His eyes were glazing. Vanessa

Robin, bullhorn in her left hand and a long-snouted pistol in her right, had emerged from the sprung-back trapdoor which was furthest on Solo's left. Climbing up the ladder after her came Felix Klaanger.

Klaanger's eyes glared like brown lanterns. His bulbous, lemon-shaped head waggled with delight.

"It will do you no good to run, Solo," Vanessa boomed over the horn.

"They've caught us," Helene sobbed. "I knew they would." She was on the edge of hysteria. Her whole body trembled as she tried to help Solo support Illya. "I—I have never seen these hellish traps before—"

Solo whispered, "THRUSH doesn't tell all, eh? Doesn't matter. Keep moving. Back toward the wall."

"Stand where you are, Solo!"

"Come on, Illya, we can make it," Solo breathed, ignoring Vanessa's orders. "The closer we are to that wall, the better chance we have."

It was false encouragement; Solo knew they had no chance at all. But he would not stand and surrender.

Illya's wounded leg left a smear of bright blood on the grass as Solo dragged him along. They must have made a sorry sight, Solo thought, the three of them huddling and limping backwards, confronted by three dozen armed amazons with pistols and rifles.

The THRUSH women seemed to strain forward, eager for blood. Vanessa Robin knocked the bullhorn against her leg in a gesture of anger.

"Very well, Solo," she thundered horn at her lips again. "Since you wish to continue the charade, we'll finish you in style. My girls are eager to get at the three of you. But you have no weapons. And you are burdened by poor Mr. Kuryakin hanging in your arms like a potato sack. So perhaps we should let you feel the real strength of THRUSH before you die."

Vanessa Robin turned and executed a kind of mocking little bow of invitation to Klaanger standing beside her.

The misshapen hulk straightened up. A slack grin of delight crawled across his liverish lips. His huge hands twitched at the ends of his incredibly long arms.

"General Klaanger and I will do the honors, Solo." Vanessa waved her left hand at him, the fingers fluttering in a dainty, lady-like way that was somehow horrible. *"With our hands."*

Flinging aside the horn for the last time, she began to walk forward. She unfastened a golden clip which held her hair in place. She shook her head. Her hair fell loose, trailing blonde and glittering to her waist.

As she walked she smoothed her tunic. Klaanger shambled forward beside her, cracking his knuckles.

Solo and Helene, meantime, had continued to back up steadily. Helene whispered, "The wall—"

Simultaneously, Solo's shoes caught in something which nearly caused him to stumble. He glanced down.

They had reached the patch of stones just under the wall and to one side of the booth which sheltered a door that led through the wall. Solo gauged the distances.

No go.

Vanessa and Klaanger were running now, running with their faces full of malicious triumph, two immensely tall, immensely powerful creatures. If Solo tried to get Illya through the gate, Vanessa and Klaanger would be on them first.

Solo suddenly felt small, weak, powerless to cope with the two monster-people charging toward him. They would finish him no matter how hard he fought.

"Helene!" he whispered. "Drag Illya into the booth. I'll hold them back."

"But you cannot stand against them!"

"Do as I tell you!"

Thud-thud-thud-thud. In the silence of the windy parade ground, the boot-soles of Vanessa Robin and Felix Klaanger thudded on the turf. Another five or ten seconds and they would be on top of him.

Klaanger's fingers flexed as he ran; flexed in anticipation of getting hold of Solo's arms and legs and ripping them from the sockets; flexed in anticipation of tearing his body apart like a hunk of meat from the butcher's counter.

Alone, weaponless, cold in his belly and slightly dizzy, Solo stood his ground. He'd stand them off as long as he could.

Helene had responded to his order. She was dragging Illya's unconscious form toward the booth.

Thud-thud-thud-thud.

Vanessa's hair streamed out behind. Her slanting green eyes were infinitely cruel. Klaanger laughed from deep in his gigantic chest, the laugh of a beast. Far back at the edge of the sky, Solo thought he heard a thin, whistling whine. It was probably only his imagination.

His eyes were blurred. The monstrously tall, monstrously strong pair came charging steadily on while he braced himself there on the patch of stones, hoping to fight as long as possible with his bare hands before they tore him apart—

Thud-thud-thud-thud.

Almost three quarters of the distance was gone. They raced with incredible speed, like a pair of—what had Illya said?

Yes. Like the Biblical giant.

Like Goliaths—

Suddenly Solo's mind clicked over.

He shot out his right hand, gesturing.

"Helene. *Helene!* Give me your belt."

Confused, fumbling, she unfastened the brass buckle and threw

the belt. Solo caught it in the air. Almost growling like an animal, he chewed at the leather, ripped at it until he had bitten a small hole through the belt.

He dropped to one knee. He grabbed a medium-sized stone from the path, wedged it into the makeshift hole and, gripping both ends of the belt so that it formed a long loop with the stone at the bottom, he whipped the belt around and around over his head and let one end go—

There was a quick, whizzing sound.

Vanessa Robin screamed and fell.

The stone was imbedded in the center of her forehead and her smashed frontal skull oozed blood.

Klaanger howled with maniacal rage. He shot his hands out in front of him, mindless, maddened, wanting only to kill the little man dancing back and forth not far in front of him, the wiry little man from U.N.C.L.E. who had knelt down again, fitted a stone into the belt and was whirling the belt around and around above his head—

"Filthy, filthy!" Klaanger shrieked, charging on, "Filthy, *I kill you!*"

Solo let go of one end of the long belt.

The stone sped with a deadly buzz.

And missed.

"Filthy, filthy U.N.C.L.E. man!" Klaanger howled with glee, zigzagging now to present a more difficult target.

Solo fumbled with another stone. He got it wedged into the hole in the belt.

Klaanger was no more than fifteen yards away. His great brown eyes shone like mad lanterns.

Around and around Solo whipped the belt in the air over his head. His arm-muscles were tormented with the pain of the effort—

"Filthy, filthy, I kill—" Klaanger screamed, hands questing out in front of him.

The stone flew from the improvised sling.

Klaanger choked, rocked back in his tracks. He clawed at his throat where the stone had struck.

From his neck a red spout of blood shot forth, splattering the grass.

With a gurgling, witless yell of frustration, the last of the two Goliaths fell.

On the parade ground a frenzied yell of hate went up from the throats of the THRUSH girls. They pulled their rifles and pistols into firing position, just as the low whistling whine Solo had heard a few moments before became a metallic banshee wail. The first of the silver-pale fighter bombers came in over the Schwarzwald and the parade ground, laying down a stick of bombs that Solo saw tumble in lazy, slow-motion fashion in those surrealistic moments when he turned and plunged for the booth.

He snatched Illya's body up over his shoulder and literally kicked Helene ahead of him into the booth and out through the door in the wall.

He didn't have to urge Helene to run after that. Panic got hold of her, real panic. She sped along beside him as they plunged into the forest and pelted ahead in the dark, banging against trees, bashing their heads against limbs—

The night opened up behind them into a bloom of fire and smoke and blasting thunderclaps.

The shock wave blasted Napoleon Solo and Helene to the ground. His forehead smacked the earth heavily.

Fireworks and fury lit up his mind.

He fainted.

FINGERS stroked his cheeks. Solo groaned, he opened his eyes.

At once his skull began to vibrate like the head of a snare drum. He kept his eyes closed a moment in the cool darkness, inhaling the fragrance of pine and fir.

Gradually the throbbing ceased. He opened his eyes again and got his bearings.

He was lying on his back with his head in Helene Bauer's lap. She was either laughing or crying. He couldn't quite tell which until he felt the warm tears dropping gently onto his dirty, sweat-streaked face.

Above him he saw gently soughing treetops. A scarlet glow washed the undersides of their leaves. He tried to struggle up: "Illya—"

From the near dark a familiar voice said weakly, "Here. I'm awake. I think I'll make it, although this wretched leg certainly hurts."

"The bombers—" Solo asked.

Helene was sobbing softly: "Gone, all gone. The headquarters is gone too. There were awful screams in the smoke. Now there's nothing but the fire—"

Suddenly she bent and pressed her cheek against Solo's.

"What will they do to me? What will they do to me for working with THRUSH?"

He wanted to tell her that because she'd helped them escape the authorities might mitigate her punishment. He couldn't find the words. He was bone-tired. The night swam around him, a confusion of swaying boughs and flickering red lights and, somewhere, a last piercing moan of agony as the last of the super-creatures of THRUSH perished in the bombed-out ruins.

Illya Kuryakin said:

"Why is it, Napoleon, why is it that, no matter what happens, no matter *what* horrors we pass through, no matter *what* nightmares fall upon us, *you* always manage to emerge as the one to have your head cradled in the girl's lap?"

Napoleon Solo felt Helene's soft, soothing fingers.

He croaked, "Takes talent," and promptly fainted once again.

Murder wore many faces, and hell was a one-way street, the day I sat alone with a dead man's kidnap ransom and realized that for me there was going to be no tomorrow . . .

RANSOM

by ROY A. ELLIOTT

THE BUICK'S motor was in excellent condition. It ran like a new car. I had just bought it from a parking garage as an 'abandoned' vehicle, paying the ninety

days' storage charges due, $180, plus a premium of $200, a total of $380. State law allowed parking garages to dispose of cars on which storage had not been paid after giving the owners three months in which to make up their minds.

I had paid cash from my wallet because I had not wanted any checks figuring in the deal. I couldn't conceal the transaction completely, of course. The bill of sale and title transfer were matters of record. But I was making it as inconspicuous as possible.

The car had not belonged to a little old lady in Flushing who had driven it on Sunday afternoons. It had belonged to the late Charlie Draper, a hoodlum with a leaning to snatch jobs, who had often depended on it for a fast getaway.

I drove it to my apartment house and into the garage section assigned to me. In mid-afternoon there was no one else about. I unlocked the car trunk and looked inside. It contained a brand new tan attache case, and nothing else. I found a screwdriver and forced the lock.

One peep told me I had just purchased the $50,000 in small, unmarked and unlisted bills paid as ransom for the thirteen-year-old Coleman heir, Jasper. The deal had not exactly crippled his family financially. Randolph Coleman, the boy's father, had paid off, just as Charlie Draper's ransom note had instructed him to.

The Coleman snatch had been Charlie's last caper.

Coleman had placed the attache case containing the dough in a bus terminal locker, without notifying the police of the snatch, and sent the key by a trusted messenger to the address supplied in the ransom note.

This had been a cheap room in a fleabag, where nondescript men came and went constantly. No one could have been more nondescript than Charlie Draper when it suited his purpose.

Charlie had stashed the dough in the trunk of his car, doubtlessly meaning to pick it up later. The Buick was clean. It had not been tied to the kidnaping. In a car borrowed without the owner's consent, he had driven the kid to within a few blocks of his home and turned him loose. I couldn't prove any of this, you understand.

I had made an educated guess based on knowledge of Charlie and his modus operandi. But a stolen car was found near where the boy was released, and he identified it as the one in which he had been transported.

Anybody's guess about what followed is as good as mine. Charlie Draper was found shot to death on a lonely side street a couple of hours after the kid reached home. Some of the smarter cops theorized that he had been waylaid by a heist artist. Somebody who knew too much had tried to hijack the

ransom money, maybe as Charlie made his way toward his garaged Buick, or a planted getaway car.

I heard rumors that Charlie carried no big dough when he was knocked off. The bandit may have been angry because Charlie didn't have the loot on him, and might have plugged him in revenge for this little oversight. Or maybe Charlie recognized him, sealing his own doom.

There was no weapon on Charlie's body. The autopsy surgeon dug a .38 caliber bullet out of him, and the coroner decided he had been murdered by unknown persons.

Since the Coleman kid was now safe and sound at home, the heat cooled, and no one ever got around to checking out Charlie's Buick. I had found it. I planned to drive it to some junkyard on the edge of town and abandon it. All I cared about was the fifty grand.

I took the attache case up to my apartment. There were people in the lobby, and people rode the automatic elevator with me. But none paid special attention to a tall, neatly dressed man in his early thirties wearing black-framed glasses and carrying a tan attache case.

He might have been a moderately successful lawyer, a private eye named Hal Madigan, or the Fuller Brush man. I wondered what the reaction would be if these strangers suddenly learned that the attache case contained $50,000 in unidentifiable bills.

I let myself in with my key. My wife, Irma, was not in the living room. There was no answer from bedroom or kitchen when I called. I supposed she had gone out to a movie, to the library, or for shopping. I opened the closet door and stowed the case on the top shelf under a couple of hats. It was hardly noticeable there. I closed the door and turned the key.

I was about to remove the key when something stopped me. I reopened the door. To my eyes, accustomed to observing details, something was not quite right. I had not had occasion to open this closet for perhaps a couple of months. But I remembered that Irma used to keep some odds and ends of personal belongings here —a couple of hat boxes next to my hats on the top shelf, a plastic raincoat on a hanger, a pair of boots, an empty suitcase.

None of these things was here now. I guessed that she had moved them to another closet. It failed to satisfy me. Why would she? Something stuck in my craw and refused to budge.

I reached the front door on my way out, and paused. I turned slowly around, returned to the living room, went through it to the bedroom. Here I stood for a moment with my hand on the glass knob of the closet door, then opened it. Neither the raincoat nor

the other articles were here. There were no hat boxes on the top shelf. None of Irma's clothes hung in the closet, no negligees, no nightgowns. The closet was empty.

Puzzled and a little scared, I looked around the room. What had Irma done with her dresses and suits, the fur coats she had recently taken from the storage vault because winter was approaching fast? I guess I expected the walls to give me answers.

The note was propped against a lotion flask on Irma's dressing table. I knew what was in it before I went over and picked it up. My penchant for details informed me that the handwriting was Irma's. It was brief and to the point.

Hal—I've had it. If you make home, you may notice I'm gone. Good-by. It was nice knowing you—the first couple of years. Irma.

I moved over to my dresser, where there was a small oil portrait of her. The rich color showed her sleek, black hair done in one of the new short arrangements with provocative bangs across her smooth forehead. Her eyes were like ripe olives in her longish face, and her lips were like some sort of luscious ripe fruit.

She had been painted in a low-cut gown that revealed her beautiful arms and shoulders and the voluptuous up-thrust of her breasts.

I dropped the note and turned away with the bitter thought that she had deserted just at the moment I had become able to give her a ranch house in the suburbs and the other nice things I had always wanted her to have.

Sure, I'd stayed away from home a lot. Maybe I'd neglected her in the important small ways. But it hadn't been from choice. I'd been working hard, trying to accumulate a stake that would let me afford more time with her and give her more nice things. Hadn't I just turned crooked in order to give her the things I thought she deserved? She could never know what a tough task it would be for me to look into my shaving mirror from now on out.

I went in the elevator and pushed the lobby button. The car seemed to rumble and bump from side to side as it descended.

It did not stop flush with the lobby floor as it was supposed to, but sank a couple of inches below it. I failed to notice this in time. Stepping out, I hung my foot on the edge of the floor and belly-whopped into the lobby. Some idiot snickered. A woman cried out.

A man rushed to help me up. Instinctively I had tried to break the fall with my hands and had gotten my right arm twisted up under me. When I regained my feet, I found that my glasses had been smashed, and had cut a dozen small bleeding gashes in my face.

Luckily, my eyes seemed to have escaped damage. But agonizing pains were shooting up my right arm to the elbow, and my right wrist was limp and numb. I brushed at my clothes with my left hand, while the onlookers murmured sympathetically. I made a mental note to check whether I had a good suit against the building management.

A doctor's office opened off the lobby and I limped into it. I came out an hour later with my wrist in a cast and sling and my head giddy from sedation.

I took a taxi to my office, crossed the outer room without speaking, and entered my private den. I had just gotten a pair of spare glasses on my face when Muriel McConnell, my secretary, entered, appearing not to notice my injuries.

"I'm leaving," she said. "Two weeks' notice. I have a job with a law firm uptown. The work is more refined."

I fancied that her nose tilted a bit more than usual.

I had just leaned back in my chair and lit a soothing cigar when Muriel returned excitedly. She had an afternoon paper folded to an inside page. Her scarlet fingernail pointed to a two-column headline saying: WIFE OF PRIVATE EYE WILL SEEK SEPARATE MAINTENANCE.

The story was not long or lurid, but it was not the sort of publicity that would bolster public confidence, and it confirmed the fact that I'd lost Irma, the hardest blow of all. Bemusedly, I watched Muriel's trim legs as she departed.

The news story gave the name of Irma's attorney, and I decided to go and have a talk with him. Maybe there was a chance of getting Irma to reconsider and return home. I told Muriel to close the office and leave whenever she was ready.

I got my car, the one that I really used, from the parking lot behind the building and headed uptown. I was able to remove my arm from the sling for driving purposes, but the cast hampered me. I winced at every movement of my right arm and at the slightest jolt.

Two blocks from the office a driver ahead of me stopped for a traffic signal which I failed to see. With a horrible tearing sound, my car plowed into the rear of his, staving in the radiator of my practically new Chevvy, and slicing his trunk open like a can of sardines.

I gave him my card and the name of my insurance broker, and entered a hotel lobby to phone for a tow truck to haul my car in for repair.

I walked the few blocks to the lawyer's office. Since I hadn't thought of phoning for an appointment, I had to wait half an hour before seeing him. He told me that Irma intended eventually to sue for divorce and alimony.

If she collected, and he said her chances were excellent, her demands, plus court costs and attorney's fees would take a large chunk of my $50,000, and the publicity wouldn't help me professionally.

I had a job that night guarding Curtis Marford's gem and jewelry collection at a big party he was giving to show off some newly acquired items.

He gave a blowout like this every year. I had performed this chore for the past five years. It was largely routine, for the guests were hand-picked, friends of Marford. His big suburban home was lit up like a convention hall when I arrived. It was only a few blocks from the Randolph Coleman mansion.

I explained to my client the reason for the cast on my wrist, and offered to recommend someone else for the job. I almost insisted that he hire another man. If I had been thinking normally, I would have.

A slender, aristocratic man with pinched features and greedy eyes, he decided there was no serious risk. The servants could give me any physical assistance I might need. He didn't like the idea of hiring a stranger for the job. If I would just oversee matters, he was sure that all would be well.

As usual, the collection would be displayed in the library, the more rare and valuable pieces locked in glass cabinets that were connected to a burglar alarm system.

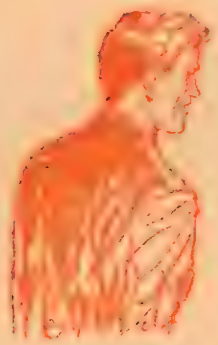
The new pieces, of which Marford was very proud, included a bulky necklace containing sixty blue sapphires, twenty yellow sapphires, some one hundred and fifty diamonds of various sizes, and a massive gold ring set with a seventy-carat blue sapphire. Lesser pretties were shown on velvet-lined trays set about on tables.

The guests would file through at midnight. There was no rhyme or reason about any of this. It was just the way Marford liked to do things.

I went into the library and relieved the butler and a footman who were keeping store pending my arrival, so that they could attend to the guests beginning to crowd the drawing room.

I shut the door against the party noise, took my gun from the holster and laid it on the desk, where I could grab it quickly with my left hand if I needed it. Any necessary shooting, I could do well enough south-pawed, but the cast hampered right-handed drawing.

At twenty minutes before twelve, the door opened silently and a kindly-looking gentleman entered. He wore white tie and tails like the other male guests. Looking as though he were lost, he smiled apologetically at me through a bushy brown beard. I started forward to tell him that the



party was in the drawing room at the end of the hall, although I couldn't figure why he didn't hear the noise for himself.

He was almost in the center of the room when he lifted his right hand and I saw the gun, a .38 caliber automatic.

I glanced at my gun on the desk. I couldn't reach it in time to offer the intruder any competition. I started yelling for help, but with the heavy oaken door closed and the racket of the party, I might as well have kept quiet.

The stranger walked right up to me and, still smiling, whacked me across the temple with his gun. I sank to the floor with the peculiar and useless conviction that the bushy brown beard was false.

I was out only a few minutes. When I was able to dig Marford out of the crowd in the drawing room and tell him what had happened, we found that about the number of gems a guy could stuff into his pockets in five or ten minutes was missing. None of the glass cases had been disturbed, which suggested that the thief had known about the burglar alarm.

While the missing pieces were relatively minor ones, the crook had grabbed himself a fortune big enough to keep him for the rest of his life, even if he went in for fairly extravagant living, provided he could fence the stuff successfully.

After having the lump on my head attended to by a guest doctor who wasted little sympathy, I waited for the cops and gave a description of the thief to the robbery squad. I then went to my office to try to think. Something at the back of my mind was bugging me, and I seemed unable to get it up front where I could examine it. I didn't want to go home because Irma wasn't there.

I had just taken a cigar from the desk humidor and was leaning back to light up when the phone rang. The caller was Lieutenant Timothy Callahan, who took the night trick in the homicide bureau.

"Hi, shamus," he said. "Are you sitting down?"

"No, Tim," I replied. "This minute I took up Yoga. I'm standing on my head."

"Grab something and hang on. I have to hand you a nasty one."

"Go ahead, Tim. I can take it." But I gripped the arm of the chair with my free hand.

"It's your wife," he said. "She's been hurt."

"How bad?"

"Real bad. She's in Mercy Hos-

pital. Get down there and ask for Dr. Henry Howard."

"A crash, Tim?"

"Hit-and-run. Witnesses say it looked deliberate. And we don't have a damn thing to work on. Get down there if you want to see her alive."

That lit a fire under me. I rushed outside and ran into a taxi driver whom I employed pretty regularly for various chores. He got me to the hospital in seven and a half minutes, which I'm sure set a record for the distance. It seemed to take an awfully long time to locate Dr. Howard, but I guess it was really only a matter of a very few minutes.

"How bad, doctor?" I asked.

"If it was any worse she wouldn't be alive," he said. "I don't mean to sound callous, but you must prepare yourself—there's a serious skull fracture, a pelvic fracture, and internal damage we haven't been able to explore yet. Your wife's chances for survival are not good."

"Can I see her?"

"She's in surgery, and we don't know whether she's coming out. You can only do what I'm doing. Wait."

There was a little lounge down the corridor from the operating room. I went there to pace the worn rubber runner extending down the center, my heartbeats making more noise than my footsteps. No sound came from the operating room. No sound came from anywhere.

I began doing the thinking I'd been trying to do when Tim Callahan had phoned.

No great amount of brainstorming was necessary to impress upon me the obvious fact that my major troubles had started with my acquisition of the Coleman ransom money. Well, I knew what to do about that. I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes before two in the morning. There was nothing I could do here. I'd go crazy waiting idly, wondering if Irma would make it. I left.

On the dim hospital terrace, I paused to light a cigarette. I had just snapped the lighter off when something hard pressed against the middle of my back. It felt like somebody goosing me with a finger.

"Don't move, Madigan," said a voice that was vaguely familiar. "Not till I tell you." A big hand inserted itself inside my coat and removed my gun. "Now, straight ahead to the car parked at the curb." I obeyed. I didn't think it was anyone's finger pressing against my spine.

We passed near a street light en route and I recognized the guy. He was a small-time hood named Manny Watts. He had an ugly, battered face, with an ear like a pancake. I knew he was ambitious to move ahead in the world of easy money and paralyzed conscience. He had left the fight game too early

for permanent punchdrunkenness, and too late to live without big money, most of which he spent on women. He slid first into the car seat and covered me as I followed.

Driving with his left hand, he kept the gun convenient in his right. I could have taken him, gun and all if I'd had good use of both hands.

Somewhat to my surprise, he stopped the car in front of my apartment building. "We're going up to your place and talk," he said.

That's just where we went. In my living room he ordered me to sit on the sofa, and he took an armchair across the room so he'd have plenty of time to shoot me before I could rush him. The tragic part of it was that I had a gun cached in that chair.

"You were seen driving Charlie Draper's car this afternoon," he said. "It's in your garage now. Where did you get it?"

"Bought it," I said truthfully, not seeing how a lie could help at this point.

"What did you find in it?"

"Fifty grand in small bills."

"Where is it?"

Now was the time to lie. "In my bank lock-box. You don't think I'd carry that kind of dough around in my pockets?"

"Okay. We sit right here till the bank opens. Then we go and get it."

"It's a fairly long wait," I said. "I'd like a cigar. How about you?"

"Have one yourself," he said. "I don't smoke." He watched me closely as I took a cigar from the humidor on the table, lighted it and settled back in a corner of the sofa. I blew a few smoke rings at the opposite wall and said, "How about a drink, Manny? It's a long night."

"I'll buy that."

He trailed me to the kitchen and watched me get out the decanter, two glasses and a bottle of soda. Back in the living room he sat down and watched me as I stood at the table and mixed the drinks.

I picked up a drink with my good left hand and went toward him. When I was directly in front of him, I threw the drink in his face, dropped the glass and seized his gun hand as I slipped my right hand out of the sling.

I plopped myself down on his lap so he couldn't rise or flail at me effectively with his free hand. With my crippled right hand I removed the cigar from my mouth and pressed the lighted end against his thick neck.

My hand hurt like hell as I forced the stiff fingers to maintain the pressure. I smelled his burning flesh. It seemed a long time before anything happened. I shifted the heat to a new spot. He squirmed and strained, clubbed at my face and head with his free hand. This was tolerable because he lacked room for a real swing. He tugged to break my grip on his right wrist so he could pump a slug into me.

I held on, because I had to, and shifted the cigar to another new spot. He couldn't stand the torture forever. A better man might have, but not Manny Watts. He was pure punk. He screwed up his homely face in pain and rage and dropped the gun.

"You monkey," I said. "You ran down my wife, didn't you? *Didn't you?*"

"Ease up the heat," he croaked. "I'll talk."

I eased up on the cigar, but held onto his wrist.

"I couldn't find you," he said. "You weren't here or in your office. I saw her on the street. I figured if she got hurt you'd show."

I released his wrist and outfumbled him for the gun. I hit him on the head with it. It took a couple of good solid whacks to put him to sleep, but he went bye-bye.

I picked up the phone and called Tim Callahan. "You still got the slug they dug out of Charlie Draper?"

"Certainly," he said. "We don't throw away evidence in a murder case. You know that."

"Well, I think I've got the gun that fired it—and the guy. He also ran my wife down. Send somebody to pick him up."

As soon as the cops had carted Manny Watts away, I took the attache case from the living room closet. I went down to the street and got a cab from the stand in front of the building.

I reached the Randolph Coleman home at 2:45, and leaned on the doorbell until a grumpy butler opened up. I told him I had to see his boss on an urgent matter. He tried to give me an argument, but I threatened to spoil his beauty, and he let me in.

He started upstairs to wake Coleman, but the rumpus at the door had already accomplished that. He met his butler on the stairs. He wore a fancy maroon dressing gown over his pajamas.

Coleman was a thick-set man with a nude head sitting low on his shoulders, and heavy-lidded eyes that made his head and shoulders resemble a sculptured bust.

"I have something that belongs to you," I said, and pushed the attache case into his hands.

The hooded eyes blinked slowly in surprise, and I got out of there before he could start asking questions.

I went home and took a stiff drink. Anticipating a sleepless night, or what was left of it, I carried the decanter into the bedroom. I didn't want Irma to die. I loved her. I phoned the hospital. They still didn't know anything definite. I went reluctantly to bed, and despite my concern, enjoyed the best sleep I'd had for weeks.

It was almost noon when I awoke. I reached for the bedside phone and called the hospital. I asked for Dr. Howard and the call was transferred to his quarters. I

surmised he was still in bed when he answered. I didn't have to ask questions. He knew what I wanted and started giving it to me.

"She came through better than we expected," he said. We never thought she'd get off the table. She was lucid for a few minutes after she woke up. We told her you'd been here, and she brightened immediately. Then she went into a deep, natural sleep, which is good. She is by no means out of danger, and we think some attention from you right now will help. I suggest you be beside her bed when she wakes up—with flowers."

"I'm on my way," I said. But I didn't get off quite yet. The phone rang as soon as I laid it down. It was Irma's lawyer. He knew about her injury.

It had happened, he said, just after she left a late conference in his office. During this confab he had succeeded in persuading her to reconsider her divorce plans and discuss reconciliation.

As soon as I cleared the line, the phone rang and it was Muriel.

"There are some messages I thought might be important," she said. "Number one—I've changed my mind about leaving. I'll stay if you want me."

"Mark yourself down for a raise and kiss yourself on both cheeks," I said. "What else is new?"

"Curtis Marford called. He said the police have caught the jewel thief and recovered all the loot. It was a fellow he'd recently fired as a chauffeur. Then, the garage called. Your car's as good as new and you can pick it up any time.

"Now here's the topper—the apartment house manager called. He wants to know whether you'll accept a thousand dollars and a year's free rent in settlement of your claim for damages. I told him you'd get in touch with him."

"That I will," I said, and laid down the phone.

As I reached for my pants I noticed that the wrist that had pained me so cruelly yesterday and last night didn't hurt any more at all.

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Featuring

JOE RODRIGUEZ

THE SAIGON CHARADE

by TOM H. MORIARTY

Deep in war-torn Viet Nam, the Red hordes had fashioned a monstrous weapon of death—and only a lone Yank detective had a chance to find and destroy it in time!

AT THE noisy bar of the Club Claire de Lune, Sergeant J. J. Rodriguez ran into the wildest story that he had heard yet in rumor-filled Saigon.

Two seamen from the tanker *San Bernardino* told him that the Viet Cong had heavy artillery hidden in the Mekong Delta channels and had lobbed a shell at their ship. It was anchored close to the Nha Be POL depot, below the point where the Saigon River joins the Dong Nai channel on its way to the South China Sea.

Rodriguez was impressed, though he did not allow himself to show it. As a CIC man, he knew that Charlie was not supposed to have any big guns.

The young military detective with the Spanish features and the flat set of dark brown eyes, soon detached himself from his sailor friends and flagged a pedicab to ride to U.S. Navy headquarters, where the office of Naval Intelligence was located.

He could do this because the gold castle insignia of the corps of engineers on his shirt collar was a cover-up for the ever-invisible

spook troops of the counter intelligence corps.

At ONI he talked to a craggy old chief, his friend CPO Charles Winters, who served in a capacity similar to that of a desk sergeant in a stateside police station house.

"The lads was not talking through their hats," said Winters. "Even so, they shouldn't have talked in public."

He directed Rodriguez to a back room which reminded Joe of the old branch lab at Hollywood Division, LAPD. Winters then turned on a hifi speaker and explained that the voice he would hear would be that of Commander John Fillmore, Executive Officer of the *San Bernardino,* making his report by tape to ONI.

"I was on the bridge," the commander now intoned, "putting the glasses on a tug up the channel, when I noticed a *whoosh* sound and then heard an impact noise from the direction of the fuel depot. Then the explosion came, like from a delayed-fuse shell.

"I noted this particularly because it seems to be the thing in this man's war to call everything a bomb or a Claymore mine. Terrorists with bombs, they get past sentry gates in Saigon and blow up hotels and barracks.

"Well, this one, it made me think at once of a heavy shell arriving kerplunk and blowing the holy hell out of everything in its way. Took me back to World War Two, so I thought you might want this report on it. Seems to me that Charlie has some heavy stuff after all."

Joe Rodriguez said to Winters, "Where could a big shell come from? I didn't know the Viet Cong had a Navy."

"They haven't, except a collection of armed junks and cat boats," Winters said. "But that doesn't rule out some big cannon they may have down in the rice marshes."

"I see what you mean. If they have a long range gun hidden some place, they might fire it only at special targets."

"In this case they missed the *San Bernardino* and started a small fire in the depot alongside. No harm done."

Rodriguez thanked Winters. Then he walked along the river front, deep in thought as he studied the opposite shore and the industrial towns of An Khanh Xa and Xom Thu Thiem.

He had received some very disturbing information. Not knowing the size of the shell, it was impossible to estimate the distance traveled. ONI and CIC didn't have enough to go on. And that could be bad.

Rodriguez returned to his headquarters and retailed the knotty situation to his commander Major Rene Cazenave, and the adjutant, Lieutenant Maury Epstein.

The major sat erect, listening intently. Then a knowing expression filled his eyes. Without much pre-

amble Cazenave put Rodriguez in full charge of developing the 'potential,' as he called it, of the oil tanker information.

A cannon shot from the VC was unheard of up to now, according to Cazenave. Therefore it rated as a case in itself in CIC annals.

"In a way, it doesn't surprise me," said the major. "The beggers have shown amazing initiative. So this time we'll take them seriously. Start off with a reward offer to informants, Joe. We have a few barrels of piasters around to pay off any worthwhile tips."

"Can I start with Poc Lo Nang, Major, or is she still on our sour list?"

"Poc and her old man Ling Mao are okay," Cazenave said. "South Vietnamese authorities have cleared them of black marketeer charges on my recommendation. They're both thankful and should be eager to help."

This was good news to Rodriguez. The vivacious Poc Lo Nang was his closest Oriental acquaintance: shapely in silk sheath dresses and pantaloons of shocking pink, fetching with the doughnut roll of top-knot hair the color of molasses gold.

Most of all, the young military detective admired the frequent flashes of pride in her sparkling green eyes. It gave her an air of surety somewhat rare in Asian women.

He did not have to search far for Poc. She was outside in a reserved pedicab.

"I wait you rong time," she said with a pout. "Fled, you giving me bom's rush?"

So he was still "Sergeant Fred Johnson." He decided to keep it that way. He asked why she had been waiting.

"Fled, I want you help me biggerer study. "I no more B-girr. I schoor girr now. You mak study me, Fled? Then I go-go university at Hue."

It was true, Rodriguez knew, that Hue in the north, above Da Nang, was the seat of the South Vietnam university and the goal of ambitious young people. But how Poc could qualify to enter was a riddle to him.

He was forgetting, of course, as so many overseas soldiers do, that at Hue the girl would be speaking her native Vietnamese language and not the seaport English patois which she had been using in talking to Americans.

"Comen, I show," she said and directed the tricycle jockey to Hong Thap Tu Street.

An imposing high stone wall and wrought-iron gate soon came into view. A brass sign, inset in the wall, read *Cong Nhan Institute of Sciences—Dr. Tri Hoi, Chancellor.*

Up a gravel path, an old brick mansion two and one half floors high served as a schoolhouse in the center of extensive lawns and gardens.

"Doctor Hoi great mans," said

Poc, pointing to a whitebearded savant in the distance. The doctor was dressed in a tent-like purple silk robe, topped off by a conical pointed black silk hat.

Soon Joe Rodriguez was shaking hands with the smiling doctor and marvelling at the man's perfect double row of solid gold-capped teeth.

He would have been a sensation on Color TV, this imposing ambassador to Fort Knox.

"Our purpose," the doctor explained in a high-pitched woman's voice, "is to teach physics in a practical way."

Rodriguez saw that the man was in deadly earnest, though quite likely a phoney who had bestowed upon himself the degree of doctor.

Dr. Hoi's long suit was simple demonstration. For example, in one garden nook the level-and-fulcrum principle of power application was demonstrated with a pole of mahogany serving as the lever and a piece of stone as the fulcrum. He could not be faulted, Rodriguez considered, from the vantage point of his East Los Angeles Junior College education, for he was teaching even as old Archimedes had done in 2000 B.C.

Rodriguez left the place admiring the oddball educator and his models of the steam piston, the water wheel, the crossbow, and other mechanical wonders.

In this pleasant mood, he arrived with Poc at her shed-like home in Cholon and greeted her father, Ling Mao.

"Your friend Major Cazenave has a job for you," Rodriguez said to the fat old elder.

Ling sat motionless with arms folded over his black silk stovepipe pants.

Animated Poc Lo Nang was at his side now, smiling proudly. In spite of her father's current poverty, the girl honored him as if he were a millionaire.

"The major wants you to spread word that he will pay piasters for information," said Rodriguez. "This particular information must be paid to one man and I will appoint him later. Now—"

"If you do not have anyone in mind," said Ling Mao, "then I humbly offer myself as go-between."

"Thank you," said Rodriguez. "I accept. You are well-known in Cholon, Ling Mao. The informants will trust you. Now the information Major Cazenave desires is about a cannon.

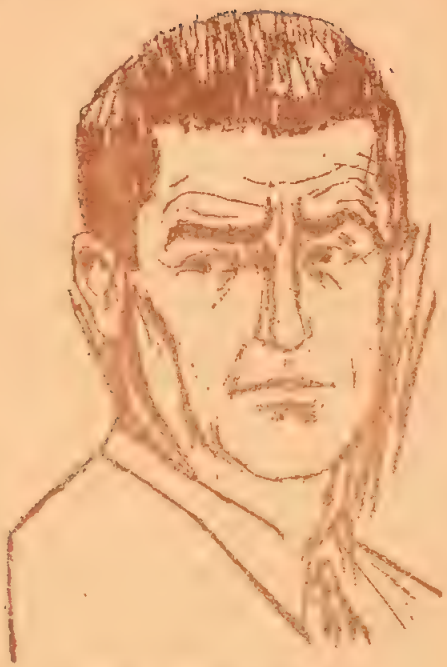
"It is rumored that the Viet Cong have a big cannon somewhere outside Saigon. They fire it and then they hide it. We want you to attract anybody who is willing to sell what he knows or has heard of the cannon. Where is it supposed to be? How big is it? How many shells do they have in storage?"

"I understand," said Ling softly. "Not take long, Sergeant. Informers organized in Saigon. Very busy

trade. My daughter will return to her friends in cafes and bars."

Rodriguez did not particularly like the idea of pretty Poc returning to her old work of B-girl in the dance bars. He felt it was bound to interfere with her new scholastic goal.

Then he smiled, realizing that once again he was beginning to worry about this vivacious Oriental kitten. He faintly wondered how many other G.I.'s before him had unexpectedly acquired the same protective feeling about her, as she sloshed the peppermint soda and the Gordon's Dry gin into a mix that to her seemed just a simple Chinese tonic for iron-poor blood.



JOE RODRIGUEZ

LIEUTENANT Epstein's Message Center quickly brought Rodriguez back to the hard realities of war. A sealed envelope marked *Confidential* contained a carbon of Major Cazenave's flyer to the immediate staff, including Sergeant Duane Nelligan, Private Blewitt, and the officer-in-charge at ONI.

The message stated tersely that another shell-type explosion had taken place, this time north of Tan Son Nhut airport, close to the Cambodian border. The incident had been labelled a terrorist bombing in the official release by the local unit information officer, but in point of fact it was known to be another projectile fired from an unknown distance.

The second recorded shot meant a chance to try to guess about the position of the gun. Joe Rodriguez exulted.

He pulled back the swing boards of maps to an area of Saigon and environs. The point in the north, Puon Ren, was approximately thirty miles from the point of the first shell's impact at Nha Be fuel depot.

Rodriguez drew a line between the points and then a right angle line of bisection. The areas northeast of Saigon, located in the direction of this line and known to be infiltrated by VC, were at least forty to fifty miles away.

This tentative fix was therefore impossible, Rodriguez decided, because the cannon could not fire that far, unless it were a mate of the

grotesque German giant gun that shelled Paris in World War I.

When Major Cazenave returned later, he confirmed what Rodriguez had worked out. Cazenave had visited no less than the artillery officer at Army topside, who had assured him that the cannon was either being moved about freely, or it was in a class by itself for size—an unlikely assumption.

That evening Rodriguez arranged to make the rounds of the discotheque bars with Sergeant Duane Nelligan and Private Bill Blewitt, in order to check out any progress with informants. At the Club Claire de Lune, Rodriguez caught up with Poc Lo Nang. She was dancing the Idiot's Delight with a red-haired marine corporal.

In a few minutes she came to Rodriguez's table and said, "I have find it, Fled. You ready comen me?"

Rodriguez nodded. She dashed away to the ladies powder room of the club's hostesses and came back with a petite Chinese girl who was dressed in black pajamas with a maid's white apron.

"This Chiffonade," Poc said. "She tak me to info informerer."

So the informants had assistants in South Vietnam. Business must be good. Joe Rodriguez decided to take Nelligan and Blewitt along for safety's sake. They left the Claire de Lune in two pedicabs and rolled to a side street near the Saigon Sporting Club in its green park.

Set back from the dark street was a medium sized three-storied building of authentic French town house architecture, accenting the vertical. Chiffonade directed the pedicabs to a servant's entrance.

Inside the door, she called up, "Madam, the gentleman is here. May we enter?"

Chiffonade led Poc Lo Nang and the three soldiers up in the half-dark of the house to the second floor, on a spiral staircase. The home was tastefully furnished. The home of a very rich person, he judged.

At the second floor, Chiffonade directed Poc, Duane Nelligan, and Bill Blewitt to enter a room which appeared to be a well-kept library. She then continued up to the third floor with Rodriguez and entered a colorful sitting room which was redolent with the aroma of good tobacco and the perfume of fresh-cut yellow roses.

A slender woman leaned back on a chaise lounge. The center toss of her hair was pepper-and-salt grey and the back hair was coal black. The sheen of blue eyes added to the woman's magnetism.

"Sergeant Rodriguez, United States Army," said Joe. He was frankly puzzled at what he saw before him: a real beauty. She did not fit the informant role in appearance or in setting. "Am I correct in thinking that you have certain information—"

"Please sit down," said the lady.

"Chiffonade erred. She should have introduced you to me. I taught her better. I am Madame Le Van Thuyet. Clarisse, the widow of Monsieur Le Van Thuyet.

"I was born an American, as you may have judged. My husband was a leader in one of the early administrations of South Vietnam and was advisor to our last emperor, Bao Dai. My husband was assassinated by a terrorist. So you see, I am a pretty safe informant to deal with.

"The major will regret not having known of you before," said Rodriguez. "I'm sure he would have wanted you to help us in our work."

"Unfortunately, that has been impossible until now," she said. Joe Rodriguez liked the calm, assured voice. "My late husband was a native official when the French were here. His loyalties were strongly with the French, even after they surrendered to the Communists in fifty-four.

"It is because of people like my late husband that many French industrialists have stayed in Vietnam to this day with their enterprises—rubber plantations, agriculture, lumber, chemicals. I can risk cooperating with my former countrymen now because I have established myself as neutral."

"Madame, is it true that you have heard of a cannon?" he said tentatively.

"As a younger woman, I saw it," she said.

"You saw a cannon here in Saigon?"

"When World War Two broke out at Poland in nineteen thirty-nine, I was a State Department civil service employe there, a young girl looking for adventure overseas. Then I was transferred to the American consulate in Saigon and reached this city through Russia and Japan.

"After Pearl Harbor I hid in this very house, which was owned by the father of Monsieur Le Van Thuyet. The elder Thuyet was a millionaire grain dealer. It is necessary to tell you this background, incidentally, because it has a bearing on the cannon I saw.

"All right, I saw the first of the Jap agents arrive in Saigon in June nineteen forty. By the fall of that year they had taken over Indo China politically and were starting to make Saigon a Japanese naval base to rival Singapore. Monsieur Thuyet and I became engaged. As a native, he could roam freely in the city and several times I accompanied him, dressed in Vietnamese clothes.

"On one such trip I saw a French battle cruiser, the *Triomphe,* which had hidden in the Mekong Delta in nineteen forty when the Hitler armies over-ran France and set up the Vichy Government.

"After Pearl Harbor, the Japs took over the interned *Triomphe* and dismantled its guns. All but one of twelve big guns were shipped

to Japan for homeland defense. The remaining gun was mounted as a defense against any Allied warships which might attempt a raid up the delta channel."

"I assume that your husband learned all this first-hand at the time," said Rodriguez.

"Yes. He had occasional shipping business down the river. He saw the gun set up on its turret. He saw the stack of shells and the cordite charges—about a hundred rounds, he said—ready for firing. Then the war came to an end. The Japs retreated north in a hurry, leaving the gun and ammunition.

"The French of the new Liberation Government came back. Now, this is what I believe you are interested in most, Sergeant.

"In nineteen forty-eight the Saigon River gun was dismounted and taken by barge to a French Navy go-down near Thanh My Tay on the river northeast of the city."

Rodriguez knew at once that his next move was to get to the naval go-down, or warehouse, fast.

In a mood of warm gratitude at his luck, Rodriguez now said to the lovely woman, "Would Madame honor our staff at dinner some night?"

What an ornament for the major to take to his officers club, he thought. She could be in her late forties, as old as Cazenave. Joe Rodriguez was therefore baffled when Madame Clarisse Le Van Thuyet arose from the chaise lounge and with a flutter of her light blue eyes, clutched at his arms. She had lost her poise very fast.

"For years I have been cooped up in this house," she said. "A trip occasionally to a French plantation to see old friends. But I dared not go out socially in this rat race of war time. Yes, I accept your invitation, my young friend and I thank you. You may give the informer's fee to Chiffonade."

Then she kissed Joe Rodriguez as if their ages might have been reversed; as if he had the spray of grey hair and she had his bush-cut black mop.

RODRIGUEZ turned Poc Lo Nang over to his pals and hurried back to CIC HQ to consult the sign out and the destination board.

Major Cazenave was listed for the Navy Officers' Club and the company of a Lieutenant Commander John Gillespie, ONI. Maury Epstein was listed ditto under his boss. Rodriguez immediately sensed something important going on.

At the Saigon N.O.C., some minutes later, Rodriguez found to his surprise that the major had actually gone to the club on business, not pleasure: to review the state of cooperation between CIC and ONI on several routine matters.

Cazenave and his staff were set up in a side card room. Along with Commander Gillespie and Chief Winters, were Lieutenant Rosalie

Anspacher, the American nurse; and Lieutenant Ed Hanley, the jet pilot of 7th Air Force.

Gillespie turned out to be a six-foot four-inch former basketball player at the Naval Academy. He was obviously a fireball on wheels.

The old naval go-down at Thanh My Tay was known to the commander, it developed. It had been pointed out to him once by the captain of a South Vietnamese gunboat. Arrangements were therefore made on the spot to go to the warehouse by Navy motor launch with a squad of armed sailors.

Cazenave had listened with few words as Joe Rodriguez described the Madame and her prison-like house. He had not interrupted at the time. But when the Gillespie plan was completed, he had something odd to say.

"I heard of Madame Le Van Thuyet several years ago," the major said. "I checked out the story and was told by several high-rankers in the South Vietnam government that the lady was losing her mind, which was the reason for her withdrawal from society. You did not get any feeling that she is a crazed woman?"

"A lonely woman," said Rodriguez, "but not exactly ready for the funny house."

In the morning, Joe Rodriguez headed for the Saigon River, marveling at the rose-pink flush of dawn from the east over the South China Sea.

The sleeping city of two million souls was coming alive with the first flood of servants and workers in the lower rungs of trade. The noise of whirring bicycles and the pop-pity-pop of dinky motorcycles made only a mild twitter compared to the roaring sound-stage the city would be at mid-day.

Rodriguez arrived at the Navy dock almost simultaneously with Cazenave and Epstein. The Navy lieutenant commander and six husky seamen awaited them in their places aboard a sizable motor launch that choffed and huffed, ready to cast off. Once aboard, the heavy duty Diesel engine sprang to life. Up the river they went at full tilt, amid the squeeing of startled sea gulls.

The swamps of the upper delta soon appeared and villages grew fewer on shore. At length, Commander Gillespie spied a small inlet on the left and directed the wheel man to land on a sodden bank.

"The go-downs are beyond this fringe of mangrove," said Gillespie.

Sure enough, past the tangle of tree trunks and lush vines in the swampy flat, three bamboo sheds loomed. Tropical moss and garlands of climbing blue Morning Glory softened the aging, greyed slats of the bamboo. An acrid smell of decayed vegetation hovered in the still air.

As they came up close to the go-downs, in wonderment at the ad-

vanced state of their decay, a shot sounded. The seamen dashed in close to the doors and windows of all three sheds, with bayonets flashing on their M-1 rifles.

The door of the center go-down creaked open. A peering old native, in Vietnamese peasant dress, came out. In his gnarled hands was a mud-caked .22 rifle of junior boy's design.

"Are you in charge?" shouted Commander Gillespie.

"I charge," said the old man.

"Show us the gun," said Gillespie.

"I get," the old man said. He put down his midget rifle and walked back into the heavy gloom of the go-down.

Cazenave and Rodriguez looked at each other in bewilderment. Did they hear right? The old chap said he was going to get it. Did that mean that the big gun was on a track mount and could be rolled out by some kind of machinery?

As they looked, along with the fascinated seamen and Gillespie, a long green cylinder appeared to be moving to the door. The nearer it came, the more detail cleared up. The tube appeared to be a big naval gun covered with dust and cobwebs. Soon the entire gun was out in the open—and at the loading breech was the proud old man himself.

He held up this great tissue paper gun on its bamboo latticework form, as if happy to be able to satisfy a normal request of Americans.

"A paper gun," the Navy officer shouted in disbelief.

Cazenave, Epstein, and Rodriguez laughed out loud.

"Where did you get this paper model?' 'said Gillespie.

"Viet Cong make," said the old man.

Cazenave broke in, saying, "Did the Viet Cong take the other gun —the cannon of iron?"

"Take iron cannon, take poom-poom of cannon seed," said the old man. He indicated with his arms, the rolling of a gun barrel or a dolly through the foliage. "Gun go away. Then sing-song woman make paper gun, Viet Cong drink booze, give two piaster me, tell watch."

"When did this happen?" said Joe.

"Two, three years," the old man said. "I watch two, three years. They no come back."

The dull-witted old fellow had therefore guarded his treasure on orders for three years, Rodriguez considered, scrounging his food from nearby jungle patches, while contemplating his riches of a few puny coins.

At the commander's order, the seamen searched through the three sheds. Nothing of possible military use was found. The old man had set up a Buddhist altar in one room. Honey suckle entwined the small figure of Gautama.

Major Cazenave said, "At least we now know that there is a big gun and the VC has it."

"Perhaps we also know how big it was," said Rodriguez. "That is, if we theorize that the VC's camp girl made the tissue paper and bamboo model a replica."

"Why didn't I think of that?" said Gillespie. "Of course. That paper monster is a dead ringer for an eight-inch naval gun—and the *Triomphe* could well have been armed with the French equivalent of eight-inchers. Some of our own cruisers were armed with eight-inchers in World War Two."

"Would an eight-inch gun have an average normal shell range?" Rodriguez asked.

"Yes. About fifteen or sixteen miles over level terrain," said Gillespie.

THE AMERICAN party whizzed back to Saigon in good spirits, except for Cazenave. He was apparently depressed by the significance of their discovery. When he reached CIC HQ, he called in his two helpers and locked the door to everyone else.

He said to Rodriguez and Epstein, "I'm going to let you in on something so important that I had to keep it to myself up to now. Only three other people in this theater of war know what I am about to tell you, and you know very well who they are.

"Okay. Five days from now the most top-secret high level meeting of the generation will take place right here in Saigon. It is so damned top secret that the public may never know it took place.

"Here are the bare details. The Vice-President of the United States and top leaders of the Senate and House majority and minority, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense will fly to Vietnam to meet with their counterparts of the North Vietnam People's Republic government. The object of the meeting will be to fix possible terms of future peace.

"Now, this information is known, of course, to a few high level people of the Viet Cong here in South Vietnam. But what are they now doing? This activity with the big gun—does it mean that they plan to double-cross their North Vietnam allies and blow up the peace meeting itself? It could be. You never know what they'll do next.

"When there has been a lull in the fighting, such as a Christmas armistice or during Vietnamese New Year's in January, what has the VC followed up with? Bombings and terrorist shootings! No one knows their motives. We just can't trust them.

"So what I want all of us to do in the next five days is concentrate on offshoots of this peace meeting. Try to discover around town if the big meeting is no longer a secret.

"As it now stands, we won't know until five days—actually after our people are here from Washington—where this diplomatic gathering will be held. We must

therefore also consider every possible place where such a special meeting could be held off the record—and could be barricaded and protected.

"Then we must case each place and form a possible defensive plan. Okay? You know as much as I do now. Let's all get to work."

Rodriguez took out a large map of Saigon and began his studies. By early afternoon, when he had a list of half a dozen possible meeting places memorized, he was suddenly called upon to face a new emergency.

A note from US Military Command's intelligence section came to CIC HQ. Two new impact points of shells had been noted close to Saigon proper during the morning. One was in the delta land east of the river and one was west of Tan Son Nhut airport. Rodriguez scaled out fifteen-mile circles around each point of impact.

The fix on the arcs of the circles showed up like a lighthouse, this time in the lowland plain some five miles above the very go-down from which the big gun had been stolen by VC. It now seemed logical that an amphibious barge had been the VC's prime helper in moving the large, heavy gun and its shells and cordite charges around the upper delta.

Test firing had been made in several temporary emplacements of the turret on river banks. Now the gun was seemingly in a permanent location, and range was known to the VC artillery.

Rodriguez tracked down the major at command headquarters. Cazenave took a swift look at the diagrams of fix, and said, "You've got it pegged, Joe."

He then marked down an X in the central portion of the diagram and drew a line from the fix, saying simply, "USOM headquarters building would be there, Joe. Not too far off target for them." Then he drew an *X* for the American embassy, and found it on the dead range of the gun.

"What do you suggest, Joe?" he said seriously. "It's obvious they experimented firing it off with different charges of cordite. Now they've found the spot to reach the highest priority targets inside Saigon."

Rodriguez's mind had been surging. "If it were my decision, I'd ask topside to give the VC gun turret position a dose of B-fifty-two thousand-pound bombs—in a carpet coverage sweep."

"I felt the same way," said Cazenave. "Wait here. I'm going to ask the Old Man to do exactly that."

As it worked out, the heavy bombers of strategic air command were on the way back to base from a strike on the Ho Chi Minh Trail at the exact time that Supremo agreed and okayed the sending of a signal to SAC at Guam.

The time of bombing was therefore set for 1500 the next day. This delay also gave sufficient time for

a battalion of cavalrymen to make a warning sweep over the two-mile square patch of real estate, flushing out innocent farmers who might otherwise get bombed.

The target, it was soon learned, contained a sloping rise near a water inlet and thick scrub vegetation —the perfect hiding place for VC who may have patiently tunnelled under the rise long ago and cleverly disguised their bivouac, the gun and its mount, and water transportation routes.

"I want to be somewhere in the neighborhood at the big moment," Cazenave said.

"And so do I," said Joe Rodriguez enthusiastically.

The best way to make their observation was by helicopter, Rodriguez said, following in at the agreed time of 1515 hours, when the formation of twenty-seven B-52's would have dropped all demolition bombs, and flying control would have been returned from bombardier-navigators to pilots for the run to home base.

Cazenave assigned his fly-boy, Lieutenant Ed Hanley, to the job of lining up two places for him and Joe Rodriguez on an armored escort helicopter.

Joe Rodriguez filled in the wait that evening by searching for Poc Lo Nang. He wanted to give her additional reward money, out of his own pocket this time, on account of the timeliness of the information she had helped dig up.

But Poc was not to be found at any of her favorite haunts. He decided on one last visit to her prep school before attempting contact at her father's house.

Dr. Tri Hoi, magnificent in his gold teeth, met Rodriguez at the front pillars of his doorway. He held a bony finger vertical over his lips, asking for silence. He then whispered to Joe Rodriguez, "Students inside, taking examinations." Joe noted that the man's dark eyes glowed with the conviction of a zealot.

An explosion of youthful voices soon advertised the completion of the examination hour in the building and the release of several hundred energetic young students. Rodriguez hurried back and caught up with Poc, who now was obviously headed in the direction of the Club Claire de Lune and a few pick-me-up belts of peppermint and gin.

"Here's five hundred P's," he said, and put into her hands a sheaf of piaster notes. "You make a good detective, Poc. We're going to miss you when you go to college."

She took the money with a smile and said, "I tak you one more informerer, Fled."

"Another? Who is it this time?"

"Student Luong Bai. I meet here. He say VC ready fo' big bango. You meet him, Fled?"

"Of course I will."

"He say tomorrow. Aftersnoon."

"Make it tomorrow evening."

"Hokay. Craire de Rune. Sevens time."

He left her after one blast of a peppermint-and-gin molotov and returned to the Le Loi Nuk barracks to catch up on sleep.

FIVE HUNDRED yards away from the target placque northeast of Saigon, Sergeant Joe Rodriguez and Major Rene Cazenave occupied wonderful grandstand box seats for the display of aerial might taking place in front of them.

The men leaned out of waist bays of the chopper's fuselage. Their hands were at the ready on machine guns. At their left sides, bandoliers of cartridges folded down into canvas accordions.

Above them, the B-52's were too high, at 40,000 feet. But their proof of existence was a simple one: the *rip-rip-rip* of towering geysers of earth, moving steadily across the lowland plain ahead.

Smoke, dust, and awesome flowers of flame spurted, zoomed, and coagulated into a vast mattress of terrifying commotion.

Shock waves grabbed invisibly at the helicopter, wrestled with it, danced it.

Echoing rolls of noise collided and moaned. Invisible giants seemed to be in a bitter quarrel.

Cazenave and Rodriguez could not hear each other even when they shouted. The pilot was out of sight in the armored nose. Pointing, gesturing was the only communication possible aboard the heaving chopper.

As Rodriguez looked, the roll of noise tapered off and the geysers of explosions settled slowly down. The churn of the rotor blades became audible again and the fuselage gave a smooth sky ride.

"I'm going in," the pilot's voice came to Rodriguez and the major.

That meant stand ready to fire if life showed itself in the bombarded area.

The pilot veered to portside and settled to tree-top height.

A dozen craters showed up at once to Joe Rodriguez. Then the pilot veered right. He was playing it safe by zig-zagging in the air.

A half mile more of the battered surface below—and suddenly Rodriguez yelled out, seeing moving figures. He zeroed in on the string of soldiers and cut loose, weaving the gun barrel side to side to better note the path of its yellow spurt of tracer bullets.

He saw two of the black uniforms stagger and stumble. He kept the squeeze on automatic, drilling in the death blows, making sure that his quarry was not faking, but was taking hit after hit.

A run of tiny holes tattoed a line of enemy hits by a machine gun on the fuselage to Joe's lower right. He looked over to Major Cazenave at his own waist gun, and saw that the major too had been lucky and escaped the burst.

Then the pilot yelled, "Turning

one hundred and eighty degrees. I see the big gun. Cover us, guys. I'm reporting to ground control."

The chopper slackened speed, now becoming a sitting duck target. Rodriguez and Cazenave peered out, detected movement in a cluster of ten or more dust-covered soldiers below, and directed machine-gun bullets into their midst. It was kill or be killed by return fire.

A tear at his left arm suddenly stopped Joe Rodriguez cold for three seconds. The knife slash feel of the bullet at once went hot. Blood surged into khaki cloth between elbow and shoulder.

Joe Rodriguez knew that he could continue to fight. This kind of a wound looked worse than it was. He had been hit before, as a civilian; hit in the calf of the leg by a cornered narcotics pusher in Los Angeles.

In another minute, the unseen helicopter captain called out, "Look to the left of the gooks firing at us! See the side of the crater? That black hump is the big gun. Infantry has the line of sight and is twenty minutes away. We're getting out. Keep firing, guys."

The major and Rodriguez did this important thing.

Bandoliers of ammo clicked through the automatic trigger hammer like a home film projector. This was the top of the war so far, for both Joe and the major.

Soon the aircraft churned along over the advancing skirmisher platoon. The skyline of Saigon shown up in the distance west and south.

Blood still oozed down Rodriguez's left arm. He rolled back his soaked sleeve. The major examined the wound and judged that a tourniquet would be far too high

on his arm to be effective. He informed the pilot, who hedgehopped for minutes until he spotted a field medical station tent and dropped down to its side.

Then Major Cazenave went on his way, in to Saigon, leaving Rodriguez to watch his wound being cauterized and to get his backside shot with penicillin.

"Can I go back in to town?" said Rodriguez. He showed his special CIC identification to the surgeon in charge.

"You shouldn't but you can," the medic said. "So I order you to check in at the Saigon military hospital this evening for evaluation. That is, if you don't want to lose that arm."

Rodriguez thanked the man and left in a jeep, Saigon bound. In his right hand he held the slug of metal

which had been neatly removed from his left arm.

It was a great feeling to be "walking wounded," instead of a stretcher case, Rodriguez said to himself. He wanted to get back on the job fast and find out what Poc's newest informant had to offer Uncle Sam.

INASMUCH AS the best place to catch up with the reformed Poc Lo Nang nowadays was at the Cong Nhan Institute, Rodriguez went there at the end of the day. His arm throbbed with pain by now. However, in a fresh khaki shirt to cover up the dressing, he appeared uninjured and in normal health and spirits.

As he walked up the gravel path to the door of the school's mansion house, through a flock of strolling students, Rodriguez was stopped in his tracks by the sight of a familiar person entering the doorway. It was Madame Clarisse Le Van Thuyet. She disappeared inside the building.

Joe Rodriguez had thought of her as a neurotic recluse. But this appearance put her in company with extrovert Saigon PTA members.

Curious, to say the least.

Soon Poc's colorful splash of purple and gold costume came to Joe Rodriguez's attention among a group of coeds beneath the verandah's pillars. He hurried up to her.

He would rather learn himself what her connection with Dr. Tri Hoi was, than to have the lady tell him whatsoever she wished. The gossip about the madame losing her mind had made its imprint.

Too bahd news," Poc said at once. She pulled Rodriguez to one side, saying, "Luong Bai, they beaterer him. Tak hospitar. Comen we go-go."

Enroute, Joe Rodriguez learned that during the morning hours, the student Luong Bai was knocked down on the campus and clubbed by three men. The hoodlums then ran and escaped before local police could be summoned.

As to the reason for Madame Le Van Thuyet's visit, Poc Lo Nang was in the dark. She had never before seen the lady. However, she said that many of the students were sponsored by rich town people, who paid the tuition fees, and the lady could well be one of them.

At the hospital, Lieutenant Rosalie Anspacher came from her wounded wards in answer to Rodriguez's request. The green eyes of the blonde nurse were somber.

She said to Poc Lo Nang, "The boy Luong Bai. Was he a close friend of yours?"

"Good fliend," said Poc.

"He called your name before he died," said Rosalie flatly.

Poc buried her face in Rodriguez's throbbing left shoulder and wept.

To Joe, the nurse said, "I gave him a truth serum goof ball because

it was plain he couldn't last much longer. His last words were 'Big gun fire Wednesday. Camouflage for little cannon fire meeting time.' Those words are exact. I memorized them."

Rodriguez repeated the words slowly for his own memory's sake. Today was Wednesday and the big gun had not fired.

But if this informant's dying words had merit, he had tried to give a warning. The VC agents had a still greater surprise waiting for the secret party from Washington and the equally secret party from Hanoi.

Rodriguez handed over five hundred P's to Poc. He told her to find the parents of Luong Bai later and reward them.

Meanwhile, he asked her to return with him to the Cong Nhan Institute. He was playing a hunch: that the dead student Luong Bai might be the reason for Madame Thuyet's visit to the school—a call of condolence, so to speak, by his sponsor.

Poc went exploring inside the institute. In a little while, she came out demurely enough and went to Joe Rodriguez in his hiding spot in a gardened recess.

"Madame Thuyet in south side," she said, "with Chancerror Hoi." She led him to a walkway under an opened window.

With the soft tread of a cat, Rodriguez moved against the mansion wall and strained to listen. At first, the doctors' voice rambled on in Vietnamese. There seemed to be a pleading quality in it, although Rodriguez did not understand the language.

He pantomimed to Poc the business of listening with a sharp ear. She caught on.

"He beg money," Poc now whispered.

Then the Madame's voice broke in somewhat harshly in English, saying, "I will give you only one more check, Doctor Hoi. Twenty thousand piasters. But you must show better progress. You must hurry!"

Rodriguez motioned Poc to follow. He said to her, "The people who beat up Luong Bai, were they regular students?"

"Velly so," Poc replied.

On the strength of that information, Rodriguez added another speculation to his fund about the Madame—someone, such as her little Chinese maid, could have brought her the news of the assault on the student Luong Bai, and the Madame's prompt visit to make a complaint was her reaction to it.

In other words, Madame was simply against trouble makers at any institution which she helped to underwrite with her Piasters. Rodriguez therefore dismissed Madame Clarisse Le Van Thuyet from his concerns, sent Poc back to her classes, and departed to find Major Cazenave.

AT HEADQUARTERS, Lieutenant Epstein filled him in on what the mop-up party of infantrymen had run across on the bombed patch to the northeast of Saigon.

"They found VC firing orders wrapped in an asbestos field pack," the adjutant said. "The gun was aimed for United States Operations Mission Headquarters and would have fired a salvo of ten shells this evening. You better watch out, Joe. They'll be giving you a good conduct medal."

Nonetheless, the information was still puzzling to Rodriguez. Why should the Viet Cong time their bombardment some days ahead of the secret meeting? The motives of the VC were ever difficult to fathom.

Perhaps the VC had planned its cannonade as a kind of final show of strength, designed to unnerve the American delegation, which was seeking an honorable peace. That was the only answer that Joe Rodriguez could conjure up.

Major Cazenave returned. He was exhilarated at the day's events, but he had no answers either about VC motivation. He did have a bomb-like reaction to Rodriguez's recount of Luong Bai's last words.

"Holy Christopher!" Cazenave said. "That could mean they've got some kind of firearms close up to wherever the big wheels are going to hold their conference."

"But no one knows yet where it's going to be, Rodriguez said. "How can they set up even a twenty-two rifle ahead of time without knowing where?"

"A good question," said the major. He smiled sheepishly. "Good idea as far as it goes, Joe. But do you know what I've forgot? I've forgot that this whole thing is after all a case where the Orientals are calling the shot in an enemy country, not the Americans.

"So let's take old Ling Mao into our confidence on this. As a Chinese gentleman of proven judgment, he should be able to tell us better than anyone which spots in town the Ho Chi Minh people would logically pick."

"Sold," said Joe Rodriguez.

The place chosen to talk to Ling necessarily had to be free of possible electronic voice pick-up attempt. For this, the major chose the close-in Ben Nghe Canal, with its sampans, barges, and lighters. There, backgrounded by the rickety shacks on spike poles in the water, Ling Mao had prompt advice for the major and Rodriguez as they relaxed in the bow of a Navy motor launch.

"China Communist lose face," Ling said, "if he do not meet U.S.A. in top-kind palace. North Vietnam Communist the same. What are No. one top-kind palace in Saigon? United States embassy, U.S.A. Embassy mean to Commie the house of American capitalist millionaires."

Major Cazenave agreed. He

asked his Navy helper, Chief Winters, to head north so that they could observe the location and grounds of the embassy, where it lay under heavy guard on the west side of the Saigon River.

The Majestic Hotel stood northeast of the embassy, the Navy chief pointed out to Joe. West were the railway station and the Central Market. South and east was the busy Port of Saigon with its river piers and the warehouses of Xom Thu Thiem and An Khanh Xa across the water.

A dynamic area, Joe Rodriguez judged, but one with an apparently safe interval of space between Embassy building and an enemy's potential point of vantage with small weapons.

Cazenave and Rodriguez returned to CIC HQ. Out came the detail maps of the embassy grounds and city area. Cazenave traced a circle a quarter mile around the center and apportioned the arcs of streets to Rodriguez, Nelligan, Blewitt, the Navy's Charlie Winters, Commander Gillespie, and himself.

Things were progressing efficiently—in fact, too orderly, Joe Rodriguez began to think—when Fate's monkey wrench in the machinery, in the form of an Air Force captain fresh-arrived from the Pentagon, came through the door.

Cazenave signed for the smaller envelope within the large despatch envelope. then walked to a window by himself to open and read the message. The regulation stated, *"For your eyes only."* There was no answer required for the courier, so he was dismissed. But to Rodriguez, the major directed his gaze and looked a storm of frustration.

"The peace meeting has been advanced in date," he said in a voice of dismay. "Advanced—to tomorrow."

Rodriguez whistled in disbelief. The very thought of that still faster action now required, caused his throbbing arm and shoulder to step up its pain more.

But Cazenave was a cool one in emergencies, Rodriguez observed. The major sat down, took up the phone, and said to the adjutant, now in the outer office, "Lieutenant, send out runners to call back all staff personnel. Instruct them to see me as quickly as possible. Then send code signals with a May Day flavor, asking Commander Gillespie and Chief Winters of ONI to please drop by."

To Joe Rodriguez, he said affably, "You know your part of the search, Sergeant. Make your start right now."

On the way to making this start, however, Rodriguez detoured. He went to the hospial and got some quick medical attention, with the aid of Rosalie Anspacher. Then he went swiftly to the area of the embassy and began a methodical inspection of every room of every building, and every roof and base-

ment, of the section to which he had been assigned. He finished the work by midnight.

There were no concealed field pieces, machine-guns, mines, or rifles to be found in Joe's area.

That night Rodriguez quietly smoked a last cigar in his Le Loi Nuk quarters, looking out over the lanai to the lights of this war-wooed city. Somewhere in the dark patches of tree-garlanded streets, the American envoys might be right now arriving, in utmost secrecy, and going over their last-minute plans for the fateful conference next day.

Joe Rodriguez visualized them as jolly, optimistic people, proud to have a part in ending the war. It was a shame, Joe thought, that they necessarily had to meet in a city which had long become a symbol for the foulest and most unexplainable, most illogical treachery in the world.

DURING THE night, Rodriguez was awakened by the returning Sergeant Duane Nelligan, back from performing his part of the embassy area search.

"The major sends along this message in the clear," said Nelligan. " 'We have confirmation that the meeting is at the place Ling Mao picked. Time one thousand hours.' "

This was only the first loss of the healing powers of sleep for Rodriguez that night. The second time came at 5:43 in the morning. A corporal of Le Loi Nuk's orderly room came to the lanai room and awakened Rodriguez with a gentle nudge.

"There's a crazy B-girl out at the barricade wire, kicking up a fuss to see you," the corporal whispered. "We've quieted her down, but you might as well get out there and handle this. If you don't, the MP commander may come along and decide to investigate. You could end up in a summary court on the old chestnut charge of contributing to the delinquincy of a minor."

"Did she give a name?" said Rodriguez.

"Poc Lo Nang."

Rodriguez rushed through a shower and got dressed. All the while he was wondering how she knew his right name. He had been "Fred Johnson" to her up to now. He arrived at the barbed wire fence in a few minutes, to find Poc looking nightmarish. She appeared to Joe Rodriguez as if she had just lost the second straight fall in a ladies' wrestling match.

"Joe, I solly comen here bother," she said. "Got biggerer news. Doctor Hoi kidnaps. By hoodrums who beaterer Luong Bai. Informerer give my papa news."

Rodriguez considered the significance of this new development, should it turn out to be true. Hoi was now placed in the same category of the late Luong Bai: both

had been regarded as enemies of the three hoodlums.

The informant Luong Bai had died with the secret of the little cannon. Had Doctor Hoi also known this secret?

Joe Rodriguez decided to examine the scene of the kidnaping. He hailed an all-night pedicab, and with Poc, arrived swiftly at the Cong Nhan Institute.

The building was lit up. He and Poc were taken to the doctor's living quarters, a tiny room in what apparently once had been a servant's attic home in the old pillared mansion.

A local policeman was noting down the condition of the upset room. The place bore evidence of a rough scuffle among the scanty articles of furniture and decorations.

As Joe Rodriguez made mental notes of the disarray, he noted a profusion of mathematical calculations on a work table. Poc was unable to translate anything from the papers except meaningless numbers. The Vietnamese policeman could not determine any meaning to the calculations.

As Rodriguez continued to search in vain for some specific thing that might lead to the kidnapers, Poc came to him. Her nostrils quivered as she sniffed daintily.

"Parfum," she said. "Is same of Madame Thuyet."

Rodriquez sniffed himself, but could not detect anything except the normal stale odor of a small room in which a man had lived alone.

"You are sure?" he said to her.

"I wait fo' you many minutes on second froor Thuyet house. Same parfum, aw light."

In a little while Rodriguez gave up on the doctor's room and went with Poc to the school grounds to make a routine inspection. As they walked in the area of the amazing scientific models, Poc suddenly pointed to a patch of scuffed-up lawn.

"Teak wood gone," she said, and explained to Rodriguez that Chancellor Hoi just the other day announced that a new series of models would be built with the wood.

So the chunks of huge teak logs had been stolen, Joe Rodriguez considered. It could mean nothing important, except a thief in need of good cabinet wood, or it could mean another lethal part of the Saigon charade.

Rodriguez had to satisfy his curiosity about Poc's pre-dawn call. "How did you know my name was Rodriguez and not Johnson?" he asked.

"Informerers at cafe," she replied, "I get them pie-eyed stoned. They say Fled Johnson not yo' name. They say yo' Spook, name of Joe Vodeo."

Rodriguez felt shock at the statement. His security as a CIC man had therefore been broken wide

apart, even at the lower levels. The failure was probably the work of a traitorous native file clerk at some personnel office.

He took Poc Lo Nang into the nearest eating place and left her happy with a hundred piaster note in her hands. Then he went back to CIC HQ to learn if events of the night had changed the day's schedule of special surveillance in any way.

Major Cazenave and Lieutenant Epstein were on the job, dog tired. They had been up all night, checking our airplane arrivals at Tan Son Nhut airport. No manifest had V.I.P.'s.

Then, an hour ago, they learned that the secret party from Washington had RON'd at Da Nang, slept in their C-133 to avoid recognition, then issued the order to ground all air traffic so that the trip could be resumed this morning in company with an old DC-3 arriving from Hanoi under American escort.

Both delegations were therefore scheduled to arrive simultaneously at the big Saigon airport of Tan Son Nhut.

According to plan, they would insert their string of four command automobiles into a convoy of U.S. Army 6 x 6 trucks at the air field and thus drive unnoticed down Cong Ly Street into the city, avoiding any incident.

As the convoy passed the Embassy, the plan stated, the gates would open and the delegation cars turn in and drive up to the doors.

Only at that moment of arrival would a platoon of U.S. Marines file out of the Embassy and post a visible guard around the large building. Any protocol involved in greeting the North Vietnamese would be handled inside the building. At the conclusion of the great peace meeting, the trip back to Tan Son Nhut would be handled by a similar convoy in reverse.

Joe Rodriguez listened and memorized the order of proceedings to come. It was almost too good to hear the mechanics of peace overtures discussed so matter of factly. A happy day in everyone's life, here and home, Rodriguez thought, if the word of it was ever made known.

Now it was Rodriguez's turn to talk to the major about his own circumscribed activity. Cazenave listened as Joe brought him up to date on the Hoi kidnaping and on the bold public appearance of the three student hoodlums, a fact which had brought the informant running to Ling Mao to tell his tale.

"Somehow I have faith in that little broad," Cazenave said at once, when Rodriguez described the incident of the supposed perfume. His remark was evidently prelude to a firm decision.

He continued, saying, "Joe, we have more than enough manpower to handle the embassy part of se-

curity. Nelligan and Blewitt can hold down the key observation posts. But Madame Thuyet's presence in Saigon worries me, as long as those hoods are unaccounted for. Since the hoods apparently kidnaped Doctor Hoi, they may have in mind the same treatment for Madame Clarisse Le Van Thuyet.

"After all, she was a full-fledged American once and they may hold it against her on general principles, particularly since she is rich and would be able to sponsor the education of more South Vietnamese, such as poor Luong Bai. Joe, I want you to give her intensive surveillance until we catch up with the hoods."

Joe Rodriguez made no protest, though the assignment sounded mild compared to the one of monitoring the peace gathering. He said, "Poc Lo Nang's good friend is the Madame's little Chinese maid Chiffonade. If I bring Poc into the act, then I'll be able to keep a close watch on Madame in her own house, through Chiffondade."

Cazenave agreed and gave a last instruction to Rodriguez to take along a pistol and a walkie-talkie metered into the exclusive CIC band, to be thus able to communicate in event of emergency.

Rodriguez signed for the equipment and hurried away. This time he went alone to the Cafe Joyeux de Foch where he ordered breakfast.

The trouble with Saigon, this vaunted Pearl of The Orient, Joe Rodriguez had long since decided, was that there was little time for food, but too much time for booze. The trick of it was to take time out for eating.

IT WAS MUCH too early in the morning for the cafes and bars to be going strong, so Rodriguez next went back to the institute to search for Poc. He did not have far to look, for a snake dance of a hundred or more shouting students weaved around campus in a protest rally with placards.

"We want diplomas" and "Police find Dr. Hoi" were the principal messages on cards with English script. The students had discovered that their otherwise distinguished chancellor was gone. Now they feared that with his disappearance their sole proof of education had cruelly departed.

Walking to the French town house of Madame Thuyet, Rodriguez explained to Poc the desire of Major Cazenave to protect Madame; and how he intended to do it with Chiffonade's help.

However, Joe Rodriguez was not to see this reasonable plan of protection executed. As he and Poc came up to the big house, they observed Madame step into a *gharry*. Rodriguez recognized the lady at a distance by the hallmark of a purple veil over a flowered hat.

He said to Poc, "I'm following

her. Come along with me. You may be needed if she goes into a powder room."

Rodriguez hailed the nearest pedicab and soon they had caught up with the plok-plokking horse and old-fashioned carriage. The design of the carriage, with the driver's seat high in the back, prevented Madame Thuyet from seeing anybody in rear traffic.

Nearing Me Linh Square, her progress stopped in front of the Reynaud Bank. Rodriguez and Poc watched her enter the bank and soon come out with an armed native guard carrying a leather pouch.

Madame, guard, and pouch then rode in the gharry on to the ferry boat slip near the Square and boarded the vessel which offered service across the Saigon River to An Khanh Xa.

Madame sat tight in her conveyance, awaiting the start of the barge-like ferry. Because she did, Poc and Rodriguez had no difficulty in boarding the ferry and remaining hidden to her. On the tandem trail, the vehicles crossed the river and continued into the dirty industrial streets of An Khanh Xa to the edges of Xom Thu Diem.

Speculations now crowded through Rodriguez's mind. The woman could be visiting some former in-law relative of her dead husband, in this messy waterfront village, perhaps ready to deal out some piasters from the pouch as largesse. Or she could be bringing ransom money to buy the release of Dr. Hoi. There were many possibilities.

As Joe Rodriguez concentrated on the problem, the *gharry* unexpectedly turned right into an alley and headed now for the river front and its fringe of warehouses.

Rodriguez instructed the pedal jockey to wait and paid him 200 P's to win his cooperation.

In the deserted notch of an alley loading dock, Madame now left the gharry, carrying the leather pouch, and the native guard remained in the carriage and was driven off.

Rodriguez and Poc ducked behind the pylons of a nearby building and observed her movements.

The name painted on the single story modern concrete warehouse structure at which she had stopped, was "THUYET." Probably a part of her family holdings, Rodriguez decided. That, or the business property of a relative, whom she was visiting.

Madame now entered a small door to a glassed-in suite of offices, obviously the administrative center of the warehouse.

Rodriguez strained his body around the pylons to stay hidden and still see inside. So did Poc.

Poc squinted hard—and then said in quick alarm, "Students. Hoodrums. Same knock Luong Bai. Same kidnaps Doctor Hoi."

Joe Rodriguez studied the three young Vietnamese inside—each a

short, wall-eyed big-muscled man. They could be Viet Cong, that is, members of the Liberation Front party of South Vietnam, as well as be defectors from the constituted South Vietnam government. One of the eternal obscacles in this war was sorting out the invisible tags on these uniformly saffron-colored members of the Mongoloid subrace.

Joe Rodriguez unfurled the canvas cover on his walkie-talkie, flipped a signal to Major Cazenave, and briefly reported his location, stating that the Madame appeared to be associating with three young suspects in an unexplained intimacy, which he would have to report upon later when he learned the facts.

Cazenave stated that all was smooth on his side of the river.

The three men, apparently leading the way for Madame, now went out of sight up a stairway in the office section of the warehouse.

The office thus was suddenly vacant. Joe Rodriguez did not wait.

He unbuttoned his windbreaker and took the Army forty-five automatic pistol from its shoulder holster over the heart. Then and Poc climbed up to the dock, and opened the office door.

At the top of the stairway, a small door closed just as Rodriguez entered the office. The door evidently led to some kind of penthouse, perhaps one that housed ventilation machinery, judged Rodriguez. Yet it masked the end of the trail of at least three mysterious people, people now appearing on the surface to be engaged in some kind of extortion racket.

Joe Rodriguez realized that it was his job to track the men to the exact end of the trail and to shoot it out if necessary. He started up the stairway.

Poc came along a few paces behind. She showed no sign whatsoever of being afraid. There was evidently that certain lift in facing danger as well as in executing Frug motions, for her.

Inset in the door at the top of the stairs, a little window revealed no penthouse, but looked out on the roof.

Rodriguez looked out and his heart leaped up in a faster beat.

Beyond were the figures of the woman and three men, crouching

over a complicated layout of nailed and roped-up timbers on the roof. Beyond all that was the facade of the United States Embassy building, glittering in shafts of sunshine across the river, less than half a mile away.

As Rodriguez observed, trying to solve the puzzle of their huddle over the timbers, across the river the convoy of Army trucks appeared from the north and drove on past the embassy building.

The convoy halted. Joe Rodriguez consulted his watch. It was 1001 hours—10:01 a.m. The group of high-ranked V.I.P.'s, including the Vice-President of the United States, was now scheduled to converge in sedans on the embassy driveway.

The moment for the little cannon to fire, had come, Rodriguez saw, with a sickening jolt of nerves in his stomach.

The answer to the Saigon charade was before his eyes. The scramble of timbers was not a confused heap at all. It was a stout working reproduction of a catapult—of an old Roman ballista, such as was at one time used by attacking legions to flip firepots or boulders far over the high walls of besieged cities.

It was an artistic reproduction, enlarged in size by the practical mathematics of ballistics supplied undoubtedly by Dr. Tri Hoi himself.

Rodriguez knew that his time to do something to prevent disaster had come.

He flicked on the walkie-talkie and said, "Major Cazenave. Rodriguez. May Day. Rush V.I.P.'s into embassy building. Rush people inside and down to basement. No time to explain."

JOE RODRIGUEZ opened the roof door stealthily and ran. His forty-five was at the ready. He ran for the woman and three men, some fifteen yards away.

Absorbed in their problem of releasing the powerful coiled spring at the correct moment to cause the most damage, the three men and Madame Thuyet were not yet aware of Rodriguez's presence.

Rodriguez took aim and fired. He fired rapidly again, and then as rapidly, a third time. Each bullet knocked down a hood, snapped him back and down, dead.

Madame Thuyet jumped up as if shot herself, in reaction of fright.

"Move back," he said to her harshly, waving the pistol to indicate the door. She slowly backed away.

Poc Lo Nang waited at the door, Joe Rodriguez saw. Should the woman try to make a run for it, Poc could easily stop her.

He was glad of this help, for it gave him time to examine the amazing instrument of assassination that had been assembled and nailed together here on the roof—from the husky chunks of teak logs

that once were piled in the Cong Nhan Institute grounds.

Among chief items of interest to Rodriguez were the heavy-duty steel spring, compressed flat and ominous; the release lever, held fast by a single rope; and the lethal cargo, a fifty-gallon oil drum resting in the spoon-shaped end of the sturdy beam-arm of the ballista.

In another few seconds this rope would have been sliced in two and the drum flung fiercely into the sky in its pre-arranged trajectory: directly in line with the embassy building.

The massive power required for this feat was there waiting in the compressed steel spring. This spring —from a piece of heavy machinery—had been compressed, Joe Rodriguez saw, by a power hoist inside the warehouse. A hole in the roof disclosed its chains of steel coming up from below.

Joe readily accepted the reasoning that in some way still unknown, the calculations of Dr. Hoi had determined just how large and heavy the catapult had to be in order to withstand the jerk and recoil necessary to propel this hand-made projectile across the near half mile of the river. Catapults of old were known to have thrown one hundred-pound projectiles more than half a mile.

Using ancient weapon here was not too surprising either he thought. The VC had long since proven exceptionally crafty at improvisation —to disguise themselves and raid well-guarded air fields, to bomb and to mine large hotels in the heart of Saigon, to bring in quantities of military supplies under the noses of military surveillance, and to disappear underground in caves.

This catapult was their little cannon. And all the while the presence of the big gun had been something in the manner of a decoy for this more deadly little fellow.

Rodriguez took up the walkie-talkie again and called the major.

Cazenave said, "Can you see the embassy from where you are? Okay. I'm standing at the right of the main door. Now I'm waving. See me near the loggia? Okay. All V.I.P.'s are inside and safe. Over."

Joe Rodriguez replied, saying "I just shot the three hoods, Major. They had built a spring catapult and were ready to release the spring to hurl a canister—probably of dynamite or worse—over the river and up on to the embassy roof or grounds. All neat packaged in an oil drum.

"So I'll be needing a demolition squad for the bomb and a police helicopter to the Thuyet warehouse for the return custody of Madame Le Van Thuyet. I don't know yet how she figures in this, but she has to figure one way or the other. She brought a package of money but Doctor Hoi is not here to be ransomed. Over and out."

Joe Rodriguez felt a bit on the sad side, walking back over the

roof to the office door, through which Poc had escorted Madame. He felt that he had misjudged the lady badly, and it bothered him to know just how and why he could have done it. He had to admit that he had made the mistake of thinking that all Americans were loyal to their country forever, if in their own ways.

Here was one of the very few whose patriotism had evidently withered on the vine. A product of the adventurous years preceding WWII, she had with the years acquired the waspish Oriental concept that personal gain justified any course.

He walked through the door and started down the stairway inside the office. He noted then that only Poc was in the office.

"Where is Madame?" he said.

Poc looked up at him in surprise, saying, "Not come down stair."

Rodriguez swung around on the stairs, saw Madame Thuyet going back through the door, with a fire axe in her hands. She had been hiding behind the door, he swiftly decided.

He dashed up and out on the roof.

As he looked, the woman swung the axe down on the lone release rope of the catapult.

A mighty *whush* of released spring tension rang out. The beam-arm of the ballista snapped vertical, too fast to follow with the eye. The canister soared up, then flattened on its trajectory, winging towards the embassy.

It was too late now even to connect up by walkie-talkie and cry a warning. Joe Rodriguez could only hope that someone in the embassy grounds had been watching, had seen or heard the missile fired.

Now the canister descended, revolving almost lazily.

A loud crack sounded out from across the river. There followed a wrenching boom. Then a geyser of grey smoke and orange fire and splintering wood, shot high. Next a blast-back of shock waves twisted and pummelled Joe Rodriguez's body, forced him down and held him down briefly like a great invisible hand twisting away.

He looked up from his sprawled-out position on the roof. The leather pouch from the Reynaud Bank was at his side, unnoticed by its owner. His left arm jumped with pain despite the medication.

Curiously, as it happens with shock waves from powerful explosions, Madame Thuyet had escaped completely, not being in the exact path of the river of invisible pressure.

She stood erect like some kind of Valkyrie, gazing defiantly at what her missile had wrought—towers of flame, windows belching out smoke and fire, walls sagging from the direct hit on the embassy.

Joe Rodriguez trained his forty-five on her, expecting this wrought-

up woman to do most anything to him as he lay, for the moment almost incapacitated with fresh throbs of pain in shoulder and arm.

"Now they can never rob me," she said, as if aloud to the whole world. Her shining blue eyes did not leave the burning building across the river. "Now they can never hurt me."

"I thought you were an American," said Rodriguez. "You sound like Viet Cong to me."

Joe Rodriguez's purpose in laying back and talking was to encourage the woman to think herself in command of the situation and not to realize that she was about to be taken into custody by authorities who would arrive in a helicopter.

"Viet Cong," she said contemptuously. "They are as bad as the new South Vietnam carpetbaggers. They are as bad as Communist Vietnam."

"Then whose side are you on? How many sides are there?"

"You are not very bright, are you, Mr. Rodriguez?" she said caustically. "You are like the rest, content to offer your lives just for the empty glory of fighting. If you came over to my side, I would see that you were paid a million piasters bonus to join. Will you consider—"

"Don't make me laugh," Rodriguez interrupted. Then there came to him suddenly a bitter realization that the expatriate American woman meant what she said. He resolved to coax her along into revealing more of her personal motivation.

He continued, saying, "I don't understand yet why you were willing to kill both Americans and North Vietnamese. If I am crazy enough to join any movement I would want to know why your people feel like they do."

"I'll gladly tell you, Mr. Rodriguez," she said, now vehemently, as a zealot turned loose. "Once there was a real Vietnam. It was called Indo-China by the French. The world considered it French, but it was more than that. It was like a Camelot, a country out of a story book and everybody was happy in it. Vietnamese like my husband owned and ran the real Vietnam.

"Those men of North Vietnam who came to talk peace today, they had their list of the old leaders whom they were going to exile before they settled on peace terms with the Americans.

"My name was on that list. The names of my friends were on it. Our own agents in Hanoi told us some time ago. The North Vietnamese would have stripped the honorable name of Le Van Thuyet of all property, wealth, and honor. All of our group—who built the old Vietnam—would have been made pennyless, our rubber plantations seized, our rice fields stolen.

"The Americans would have accepted their Black List, for what do Americans care for except

peace? We Original Vietnams, we choose death instead of a peace that favors the North or favors the South or favors the Viet Cong—"

Joe Rodriguez interrupted, saying, "In other words, you would prefer to keep the war going on, so as to hope to come back to power—"

The walkie-talkie squawked a signal. Joe Rodriguez turned it on, not without worry.

"Wow!" said Major Cazenave. "If I didn't rate a Purple Heart the other day, Joe, I sure do now. Fortunately, I'm alive. And everything's not as bad as it may look to you from across the river. By the time that can of TNT hit our roof, we had sent every last one of those V.I.P.'s out through the basement tunnel into a bomb shelter. They're all safe, I wanted you to know.

"Also, Joe, our kidnaped friend is in custody. Sergeant Blewitt caught up with Doctor Tri Hoi in his Embassy search sector just as the man was about to light a match to his gasoline-soaked body and make himself a martyr.

"Blewitt made him talk. The kidnap story was a plant to cover his disappearance. The doctor and the Madame were going underground to head up their own faction—dedicated, believe it or not, to continuing the war and thereby keeping South Vietnam prosperous for you know who. Good luck. Over."

"Good news, Major," said Joe Rodriguez. "And here's the police chopper plunking down to pick up Madame Thuyet. You are going to enjoy talking to her. It's going to be like a dump session at the station house, I guarantee you. Roger, dodger, over and out."

Still, it was not quite "out" for Jose Juan Rodriguez yet. In a few minutes he was back with Poc Lo Nang in the warehouse office, waiting for the MP's over-worked meat wagon to come across on the ferry boat and pick up the three bodies on the roof.

He lit a cigar and said to his vivacious helper, "I never thought Madame Le Van Thuyet had it in her to deceive us about the big gun —when she knew very well that the gun was a cover for this horrible trick of some obscure faction leader. I never thought either she would rush back on the roof with that axe and release the catapult. I thought she was a lady and ladies do not do such crazy things."

"Chiffonade say Madame crazy," said Poc. "Chiffonade say Madame think she queen of Vietnam. Gonna mak Doctor Hoi king. Madame nutty as fluit cake. Mean no harm."

Rodriguez smiled sarcastically, thinking—no harm? Only causing physical damage of at least a quarter million dollars American; only blotting out the first bonafide chance to bring about an honorable peace in this unwanted war. No harm? Wow!

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Never Too Good—To Die

No one can die twice, she told herself. And then, seeing the tight, mad look in his face . . . Or—can they?

by J. SIMMONS SCHEB

MYRA SAUNDERS was irritated that afternoon. She flicked on the windshield wiper and the headlights, glanced into the rear-view mirror and pushed at her dark brown hair.

"Damn!" she said aloud. The one time Antoine had done a halfway decent job, it had to pour down rain before she could get home.

Anyway, she thought as she pulled the car under the carport, she'd remembered to close the windows in the house. Nothing there would be wet if Charles hadn't been home some time during the day and opened them again.

She switched off the motor and heaved herself out from under the wheel. Myra was a big, bulky woman of thirty-eight in a bright scarlet suit that strained at the seams as she gathered up her packages and clicked her way over to the side door of her house.

The key wasn't under the mat, but when she tried the door it opened, and she made a mental note to speak to Charles about that. His carelessness was inexcusable.

Immediately, however, she knew it hadn't been Charles. Her kitchen was a mess. Every cupboard door was flung wide; half-open drawers spilled out dish towels, potholders, recipes. One of her favorite cups lay broken on the floor.

"Is someone here?" she shouted. "Is somebody in my house?"

Angrily, she marched across the kitchen and laid her packages on the counter. Then suddenly, fear swept over her. Somebody could be in her house. She spun around, and there he was, crouching behind the open door.

At first he seemed to be all shoulders, just one big pair of shoulders in a wrinkled, dirty trench coat.

He made no sound. He simply crouched there, staring, holding her yellow-handled carving knife in his enormous gloved right hand.

Myra couldn't move. Her legs were paralyzed, her feet riveted to the floor. "Who—?" she demanded. "What—?"

He took one step forward, and she saw beady little eyes peering from beneath a battered rain hat, the blue-black stubble of a beard on fatty jowls, the thin, pale line that had to be his lips. She opened her mouth to scream but he rushed at her. A slash of sudden pain shot through her body, and as she slumped forward on to the floor, she heard her scream come out a moan.

He hesitated. She could see his big, ugly work shoes, planted inches from her face, and she could hear his heavy breathing, but the knife had fallen under her and he made no attempt to get it. Instead, he must have panicked, because the shoes turned suddenly and pounded away, and the side door slammed so violently that the whole house seemed to shake. She could hear his foot steps fade as he ran across the carport.

A long time later, Myra stirred and heard the living room clock

strike five. She raised her head. The pain in her side was excruciating and she found that her legs refused to obey. Tears rushed to her eyes. Sweat broke out on her forehead. Panic rose in her throat.

Myra laid her head down on her arms. Think! she told herself. Think!

It would be at least an hour and a half before Charles got home, and she wasn't at all sure she could last that long. The pool of blood beneath her was getting bigger with every heartbeat. Instinctively, she knew that life was draining out of her.

The phone was across the kitchen, high up on the wall. She judged the distance at about eight feet. Too far, but she had to try. Forcing herself up onto her elbows, she started edging towards it, dragging her legs behind. In the middle of the floor she collapsed, her elbows crumpling under her and her head bumping hard on the cold and unyielding stone. Tears came to her eyes again and streamed down the sides of her face.

"Why?" she demanded of the empty room. "Why should this happen to me?"

Her frustration turned to anger. A thousand times she had told Charles it was stupid to keep a key underneath the mat. Why hadn't he listened? After fifteen years of marriage, why couldn't he just once—

Someone was knocking at the front door. "Come!" Myra tried to shout. But the shout was really a groan, not much more than a whisper. "Come!" she said again, but her voice was even weaker.

She waited. It would be Mrs. Armstrong, from across the street, coming to borrow something. Mrs. Armstrong was a withered, bony little woman who was none too bright, but at least she would know enough to call an ambulance.

Myra's lips moved. "Come in, Mrs. Armstrong. Come on in and borrow anything you want. I'm sorry I said that last night. I don't care if you *never* get organized. Just come in and save my life!"

The knocking stopped. Minutes passed, and Myra waited for footsteps to come around the side of the house to the door that led in from the carport. They didn't. They simply faded away.

"You idiot!" Myra cried, getting up to her elbows again. "Couldn't you see the car? You knew I must be home. Why didn't you come to the side door? You could have seen through the window!"

The phone began to ring. That would be Charles, calling to tell her he'd be late again. She looked up at it gratefully. Oh, Charles. Wonderful, wonderful Charles!

She ground her teeth and began to crawl again. Slowly and painfully she went, leaving a trail of warm blood behind her. By the end of the fourth ring she was under the instrument, desperately trying

to pull her useless legs into a useable position. A yard above her head the phone continued to ring, four more times, five, six.

"I'm coming!" she tried to scream, clutching and clawing at the smooth yellow wall dancing in front of her. At last, she made it. Her legs were uncertain but they were under her, and she snatched the receiver from the hook just in time to hear a click.

"Charles," she murmured. "Charles!"

The dial tone answered her.

Myra Saunders sank to the floor again, crying silently. "Damn you, Charles. Damn you! You knew I'd be here. I'm always here, fixing dinner for you. How could you hang up!"

The clock chimed for half past five. One more hour to go. Surely, he'd come at 6:30. Surely, he wouldn't be late tonight, when he hadn't been able to reach her.

Above her head, the receiver dangled and the dial tone buzzed on. Myra closed her eyes, counted twenty heartbeats and opened her eyes again when she heard the sound of voices.

For the first time she realized that it had stopped raining, and the kids next door were playing in their yard.

"Oh, thank heavens," Myra breathed. "Mark! Mason! Come help me. Bring your friends. Come over in my yard and up to the window and find me. Let your ball hit against my house. I won't take it away. I promise."

The side door was now about four feet from her, and from this angle, she could see that it wasn't quite closed. The man must have slammed it so hard it had bounced back open again. She had to get to get to it!

Her hopes soared, and she began to crawl one more. The voices were like music—young, high voices, not quite ready to change. There must have been five or six of them. She could even hear the crack of bat on ball, and just as she got to the door, there was a resounding thump. The ball had hit her house.

Ignoring the pain, she scrambled the last few inches, got to her knees and threw the door open. lunged through it, felt the wound open wider as she scraped across the threshold and down the little step into the carport.

"Boys," she whimpered. "Boys!"

A pair of running dungarees crossed her line of vision. A cry rang out. "We'd better get out of here!"

There was the sound of running feet again, then silence. They had probably knocked down a plant or put a dirty mark on her house. And then the little brats had run!

Fresh tears ran down Myra's cheeks. Her head throbbed; her elbows were on fire. She could hear the cars going by on the street. Men—more faithful men than Charles—were hurrying home

from their offices. Flighty, frivolous women were rushing home from bridge in time to stick frozen dinners in their ovens. Her shoulders jerked with sobs.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why?"

No one looked her way. No one stopped or even slowed. She knew they wouldn't. Not one single solitary Good Samaritan lived on Sandcastle Lane.

Movement finally caught her eye. She was lying face down, sandwiched between her car and the door, in front of a screen breezeway through which she could see across her own backyard and the Hartmans' and on into the Hartman house.

Myra's pulse began to quicken. Beth Hartman was standing behind that door and waving.

"Beth!" Myra breathed. "Beth! I should have known you'd help me."

It had been nearly six months since she and Beth Hartman had spoken, but Beth wouldn't hold a grudge at a time like this. Not just because Myra had poisoned their cat! After all, Myra's was a human life!

Myra inched her way forward, and when she got to the front of her car, she could see that the lights were burning. So that was it! She'd left the lights on after the rain, and Beth was signaling her.

"Oh, Beth! Beth! Come on over. Please come over and find me!" Myra raised up on her hands, pressed her face hard against the screening of the breezeway. "Look, Beth. See me. Come over and save my life!"

The pain was too much to bear. She collapsed again and lay with her face in her arms, waiting for Beth to come. Certainly, she'd come. She wouldn't just stand there waving. Sooner or later, she'd wonder why Myra hadn't responded, and she'd come over to tell her about the car lights.

"Come, Beth, come. See me. Save me." It sounded like a first grade reader. And ironically enough, Myra thought, the whole thing was so elementary. All Beth had to do was walk across the yard.

Myra waited a long time before she raised her head again and saw that Beth was turned around waving in the other direction. A tremendous sob rose into her throat, threatening to choke her. Beth Hartman had to be purposely avoiding even looking at the Saunders house. She was simply washing her sliding glass door!

"Please, Beth, please! Look at my house, see that my car lights are on and then come over to tell me! I won't scream at your child.

She can pick all the flowers she wants!"

Beth Hartman squatted down, as if to examine the door for streaks, then went back inside and closed the full-length draperies.

Myra's head dropped down into her arms again, and nausea swept over her. She hated Beth Hartman and all the other stupid, self-centered, grudge-holding people in the world.

With her last bit of strength she rolled over onto her back and lay staring up at the ceiling. She would simply wait for Charles. The pain was too great now, and she was far too exhausted to try any more.

The neighborhood sounds died away, and the sun was sinking rapidly. Everyone had gone inside to eat. No one could possibly find her now except Charles. She was almost hidden from the street by the car and the darkness, and it was extremely unlikely that anyone else would come. She decided she was glad. Never once during the five years she had lived in the house had she asked a favor of a neighbor. She didn't need one now.

She had no idea of the time, but it was completely dark when she heard Charles' car. He parked in the driveway, slammed the door and walked towards her very slowly.

She could see his tall, lean silhouette outlined against the moonlight as he stepped to the edge of the carport. He hesitated, then hurried to her, knelt down and took hold of her wrist.

"Myra!" he said hoarsely. "Myra?"

She couldn't answer. Her lips wouldn't move, but she tried to flutter her eyelids. Call Jim! she tried to tell him. I'm hurt, but I'm alive. I can make it if you get hold of Jim right now.

He was agonizingly slow. "Move, Charles, move!" she commanded mentally. "Can't you see that I'm bleeding to death?"

At last he got up and hurried to the phone. She could hear him dialing the number. Oh, thank you, Charles, she thought. Thank you! Thank you! I'll forgive you for everything.

For everything? She heard his voice, low-pitched and edged with anger. "Sabino?" he was saying. "She's alive."

Sabino? Jim's name wasn't Sabino. It was Fox.

"She isn't dead, I tell you. No . . . no . . . I couldn't! I paid you . . ." He broke off, listened a minute, then clicked the receiver into place. For an eternity, there was nothing. Then his footsteps crossed the kitchen again and he came outside. The car lights went out and he closed the door quietly, then went back into the house. Myra was left in total darkness.

"Oh, no!" she cried silently. "Charles! Please! Don't leave me here to die. You can have the divorce. Marry your little tramp. I

won't stop you. I won't even ask for alimony. And I'll never tell on you, Charles. I promise I won't tell! Just save me, Charles. Please save me!"

It was almost as if he'd heard her. His footsteps were coming back again. They were slow, but they were coming. She had known he couldn't do it. Charles Saunders wasn't the type. He didn't have the nerve.

"Hurry, stupid, hurry!" Her throat ached, and her brain was bursting into flames. She would get him for this. If it was the last thing she ever did, she would get him.

And then he was standing over her.

"No, Charles, no! I'll give you the divorce. I'd never hurt you, Charles. I've never hurt anyone. I've been a perfect wife. You know it. Put that pillow down, Charles. You idiot! You'll never get away with . . ."

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TEN LONG YEARS

"You will tell me where the money is. Now. Or—" He saw the cane in the big man's hand . . .

by
Richard Hill Wilkinson

SIDNEY SCHLIFF'S hobby was studying the stock market. It fascinated him. Over a period of two years, by making careful investments, buying and selling at the right time, he made a little more than two million dollars. On paper, that is.

It was fun, and exciting.

At the end of this two-year period Sidney felt that he was ready to begin a bit of jumping in and out for real. He first jumped into Allied Plastics, and lost two thousand dollars within three weeks because he didn't jump out at the proper time. Sidney shrugged off the loss. So he'd made a miscalculation. So what? It wasn't his money he'd lost. It was the bank's.

Sidney worked in the bookkeeping department of the Bomont First National Bank and Trust Company. It was easy for him to juggle the books around so that the discrepancy wouldn't be discovered, at least for the time being. And long before the "time being" had expired Sidney would have jumped in and out again and replaced the amount of the first loss.

For example, Sidney had his eye on Fairbanks Steel. Apparently Fairbanks Steel had its eye on Sidney, because the day after he waded in with a three thousand dol-

lar investment, Fairbanks stock plunged to an all time low.

This shook him up. He couldn't understand why things weren't working out for him as they had when he was only a paper investor. He was now five grand in the hole and the bank's books were giving him an uncomfortable feeling every time he opened them. They seemed to screech at him to restore the money he had stolen.

Sidney studied the market for another week and then, convinced that his system couldn't fail a third time, decided to take the plunge. He "borrowed" another ten thousand dollars from the bank and nailed it on Melrose Chemicals. Melrose Chemicals had no sympathy or understanding whatever. Ten days later they folded. Sidney's —or the bank's—ten thousand bucks vanished, never to be heard from again.

Sidney was now beset by a feeling he had never before known. It was a feeling of panic. Desperately he scanned the stock market reports. Brown Electronics looked good. It looked extremely good. It was a comparatively new company and had moved steadily forward since its inception. But was it worth the risk?

Sidney thought about it. Despite his careful calculations he had failed three times. The bank examiners were due any day. They would detect the discrepancies at a glance and point the finger of guilt at him. He'd be arrested, tried and convicted. He'd be sent to jail for ten years, with three years off for good behavior.

Sidney shuddered. Then he had a great idea. If he was going to be sent to jail anyway, why not be sent for something worth while?

The next day was Friday and Sidney arrived at the bank with an empty suitcase. He told everyone he was leaving right after the bank closed for a week-end with some friends in New Hampshire.

Sidney was a long-time and trusted employee. One of his duties was to check the cash in the vault at the end of each business day. Thus it took no great scheming for him to fill his suitcase with stacks of currency, amounting to a quarter of a million dollars, without arousing suspicion. The theft couldn't possibly be discovered until the vault was opened on Monday.

At six o'clock he left the bank, carrying the now rather heavy suitcase, and climbed into his car. But he didn't head for New Hampshire. Instead he headed for the Bomont Airport.

On Monday Sidney was late in getting to work. It was early afternoon when he finally stepped through the door of the bank. He was promptly seized by two plainclothes officers and hustled off to jail.

In high school and later in college Sidney had engaged in ama-

teur theatrics. He considered himself a fairly good performer. He proved it now. To all of the questions, accusations and threats that were hurled at him he replied with shock, disbelief, wonder and indignation.

The interrogated him for hours, but it didn't do any good. Sidney claimed he was innocent. Not only innocent but shocked that the bank could think him guilty of such a heinous crime.

He didn't care what the books showed. Someone must have forged his handwriting. Of course he couldn't tell them where he'd hidden the money. How could he when he didn't have it to hide?

And so at last they gave up. They charged him formally with the crime. He was tried in court, convicted and given a ten-year prison sentence. But they didn't get him to tell where he'd hidden the money. How could he, he protested to the bitter end, when he didn't have the money to hide?

This, of course, was not the end of the matter. How could it be with a quarter of a million dollars stashed away somewhere and so many people wondering about its location? Two weeks after Sidney was incarcerated in Hayden State Prison he was summoned to the office of the captain of the guards. The captain's name was Jack Manners, a brute of a man with a deceptively soft voice.

Sidney stood at attention before the captain's desk and waited for the man to speak. The man took a long time to do so. He looked Sidney over with an expression that seemed to be no more than idle curiosity. Then he picked up the cane that was lying on his desk and began caressing it fondly.

"You," the captain said presently, "don't look like a man capable of stealing a quarter of a million dollars."

"Thank you, sir. You're the first to believe me when I say I didn't steal it."

Captain Manners laughed softly. "As captain of the guards here at Hayden, it is within my power to make an inmate's stay pleasant or miserable. I assume, Mr. Schliff, that you would like your stay here to be made as pleasant as possible."

Sidney swallowed hard. "Yes, sir." Suddenly he felt cold inside. He was beginning to get the drift of what was coming.

"Naturally." Captain Manners stroked the smooth cylinder of the cane more rapidly. He got up, came around the desk and sat on its edge. He was within a few feet of where Sidney stood. "In that case, Mr. Schliff, I think I can arrange it."

"Thank you, sir."

"All you have to do is tell me where the money is hidden." He paused. "Half of it will be waiting for you when your time is up. The other half will be in payment for

my efforts in making your stay here pleasant."

Sidney swallowed again. "But, sir, you've already told me that you believed I didn't steal the money."

"Naturally you can't have any idea how unpleasant I can make life here for you at Hayden. I should have first given you a sample. I shall do so now."

The cane swished through the air and caught Sidney a stinging blow on the cheek. A red welt appeared. Sidney yelped and leaped away.

The captain pushed a button on his desk, then swung around and clouted Sidney on the jaw. Sidney dropped with a crash. The captain strode over and kicked him brutally in the ribs.

At that moment the door burst open and two guards came rushing in.

"Did you ring, Captain?"

"And barely in time," Manners growled. "This fool attacked me. Throw him in the hole."

Sidney spent five days in the hole. There was nothing to do but nurse his wounds and think. It occurred to him that as long as so many people suspected that he had a quarter of a million dollars stashed away he'd be hounded for the rest of his life. It wasn't a pleasant prospect.

He had seven long years to serve here at Hayden and, if he were any judge of men, Captain Manners wouldn't abandon his determination to make him reveal the hiding place of the money.

And after the seven years were up, what then? The police would still be curious. And then there were the hoodlums and the gangsters.

Sidney shuddered. He couldn't stand physical pain, and he knew that hoodlums and gangsters had their methods of making a man talk.

Sidney took a deep breath. He had an out. But could he take what was in store for him for the next seven years? Was it going to be worth it? Sidney decided that it was.

Captain Manners was a stubborn man and relentless. The more Sidney held out on him the more determined he became. It was only when Sidney actually seemed on the verge of death that he relented.

Sidney spent more time in the hole than he did in his cell. He had to subsist on the most meager of diets. He was given the most menial of tasks to be performed in the prison workshops. Beatings with the cane became almost a weekly routine. He was tricked into making it seem that he was trying to escape, and spent a full month in the hole.

But Sidney didn't break. He had a vision and he kept it in front of him at all times. It sustained him.

The worst blow, the one that was hardest to take, came at the end of the seven years. He was brought up

before the parole board. Captain Manners' report on Sidney was passed from hand to hand, read by each member. They exchanged glances and nodded of one accord. Sidney was refused a parole.

Sidney almost broke then. Almost, but not quite. Not even after a session that night in the captain's office with the cane. No, he'd endured seven hellish years. He could endure another three. And he did.

When the doors finally opened for him Sidney stepped into the outside world a mere shadow of the man he'd been ten years before. He stood for a minute looking around him, looking across the street into a vacant lot that extended for some distance without any fences, watching the traffic that passed in front of him. Across the way three automobiles were parked against the curb. Two of them were occupied, a single man behind each wheel. Both were watching him steadily.

Sidney sighed, shifted his suitcase to his left hand and moved along the street toward a bus stop. From the corner of his eye he saw the occupants of the parked cars start up their motors. A bus swung in at the curb and Sidney stepped aboard. Before settling himself in a rear seat, he glanced through the window. Both of the automobiles were idling along after the bus.

Sidney sighed again, leaned back his head and closed his eyes. Ten years ago he hadn't thought it would be like this. He hadn't looked this far ahead. He had thought that after he'd served his time, paid his debt to society, he'd be allowed to go free, left alone.

Now he realized that he'd never be left alone again, never have any

privacy. He'd be watched day and night. He might even be kidnaped and "persuaded" to tell where he'd hidden the money.

He should have planned the robbery more carefully. He should have made it seem at least possible that someone else had stolen the money. But no. He had been so sure of how things would work out that he had blatantly gone ahead, made no effort to cover his trail nor made an attempt to cast suspicion on anyone else—and then practically turned himself in by returning to the scene of the crime.

Sidney spent the next three days in a cheap rooming house. Whenever he went out, no matter the time of day or night, he saw the men. They were lounging in doorways, standing on street corners, sitting in parked cars. No matter where he went, he was always fol-

lowed. He began to think that everyone was on his trail.

Toward the end of the third day the germ of an idea began to form in Sidney's mind. He spent an almost sleepless night. He awoke early. The germ had come into full bloom.

Relaxed for the first time in days, he ate a leisurely breakfast at a nearby restaurant, then stepped into a cab and ordered the driver to take him to police headquarters. He knew that he was being followed, that he was being watched. But now he didn't care.

Now suddenly the future looked bright.

Lieutenant Marvin Kennessy of the central police force was a big man, red headed, craggy-faced, intelligent. He was a veteran of twenty years, having worked his way up from cop on the beat.

He sat now staring at the man sitting across the desk from him with an almost incredulous look on his face.

"Sidney Schliff? It's hard to believe."

"It's me all right, Lieutenant," Sidney said.

"Looks as though they gave you a pretty rough time up at Hayden."

"They did."

Lieutenant Kennessy wrinkled his forehead. "Well, a criminal can't expect to be treated with gloved hands, especially one who continually seemed to be looking for trouble." He spread his hands. "But that's not in my department. What was it you wanted to see me about, Schliff?"

"I want to return the quarter of a million dollars I stole."

There was a moment of silence. Lieutenant Kennessy let the match he had lighted to fire up his pipe burn until it toasted his fingers. Then he shook it out.

"So at last you admit having stolen the money?"

"I do."

"And now, having served time for the crime, you want to give the money back. It doesn't make sense."

"It didn't to me when I planned the robbery ten years ago. I thought that after I'd served my time I'd be let alone. I thought I'd—well, I thought I'd be able to enjoy the money. Ten years isn't too long to wait for a quarter of a million dollars."

"And now you've discovered it isn't going to work out that way." The lieutenant hesitated, lighting his pipe. "I don't know what your angle is. You're safe in assuming you won't be sent back to jail again whether or not you return the money. You've paid the score once."

"I'm aware of that."

"So. Why return the money?"

Sidney sat forward in his chair. "Lieutenant, for ten years I haven't had a moment's privacy. I've been beaten and humiliated and tricked into doing things that I never intended doing. The only privacy

I'd had has been during the months I've spent in the stinking black hole. Only a man who has served time in prison can know what a precious commodity privacy is."

Sidney paused and the lieutenant said, "Go on."

"Since the moment I stepped through the prison gates I've been followed, watched. I don't know whether those following me were your men or if they were hoodlums. But I do know that I'll be followed and watched and harrassed and perhaps beaten again for the rest of my days unless I return the money."

Lieutenant Kennessy nodded. "You know right, son. You'll be under serveillance every minute of every day and night. You'll never be able to enjoy a nickel of that money."

He paused, studying Sidney closely. "You were willing to sell ten years of your life for a quarter of a million dollars, and now you want to buy back what remains of your years for the same quarter of a million?"

"That's about what it amounts to."

"All right." The lieutenant stood up. "You're being smart. You've figured the right angle. Where's the money?"

Sidney shook his head. "It isn't as easy as that."

"Oh?"

"I'll get the money. I'll deliver it here to you. Call off your watch dogs. Make sure I'm not followed."

The lieutenant uttered a short laugh. "Now there's one for the book. You want me to give you a chance to pick up the loot and then disappear from sight. Don't be a fool."

"I'm not being a fool. You know I couldn't get away with a stunt like that. I'll give you time to alert every police force in the country. You can stake out every railroad station, plane and bus terminal, steamship line and highway. You know I couldn't get through a dragnet like that."

Kennessy took a turn around the room, came back and stood looking down at Sidney.

"You must have a reason for not wanting us to pick up the money. What is it?"

"I don't believe you'd understand, Lieutenant." Sidney hesitated. "I'd like to see the money again, count it, handle it. After all, it's the end of a dream for me."

"And you think you could resist a possible urge to take off for parts unknown?"

"Be reasonable, Lieutenant. If I did that I'd be hounded worse than I am now."

Kennessy uttered his short, barking laugh. "Brother, this is one I can tell my grandchildren. Suppose I don't go along with the gag?"

Sidney shrugged. "Then the money stays where it is." His eyes narrowed. "Be quite a feather in your cap if you could return the

quarter of a million to the bank, wouldn't it, Lieutenant."

"And all you want is to be left alone for the rest of your life? You'll pay a quarter of a million dollars for the privilege?"

"Yes. When I return the money here I want you to notify every news service in the city. I want pictures published of me returning the loot. I want the public to know that there's no longer a reason for anyone to dog my footsteps from now on."

"Thought it all out, eh?"

"I tried to."

The lieutenant took a deep breath. He started to speak, checked himself, then stood up. "All right. I don't seem to have any alternative. You can stay here for the next three days while I pass the word. We'll rig up some kind of disguise for you. On the morning of the fourth day we'll turn you loose. On the fifth day I'll expect you back here with the money. And I warn you—you'd better show."

"I'll show," Sidney said. "You can count on it." He sighed. "It'll be worth it to live like a free man, even though I'm broke."

Three months later, on board the jet liner that was taking him to Europe on the first leg of a luxury world tour, Sidney struck up a speaking acquaintance with his seat companion. The man, whose name was Michale Reaser, was head of an internationally known textile company and was presently on his way to join his wife in the south of France for a short vacation.

"And what's your line, Mr. Schliff?" he asked with only mild curiosity.

"Stocks," Sidney answered promptly.

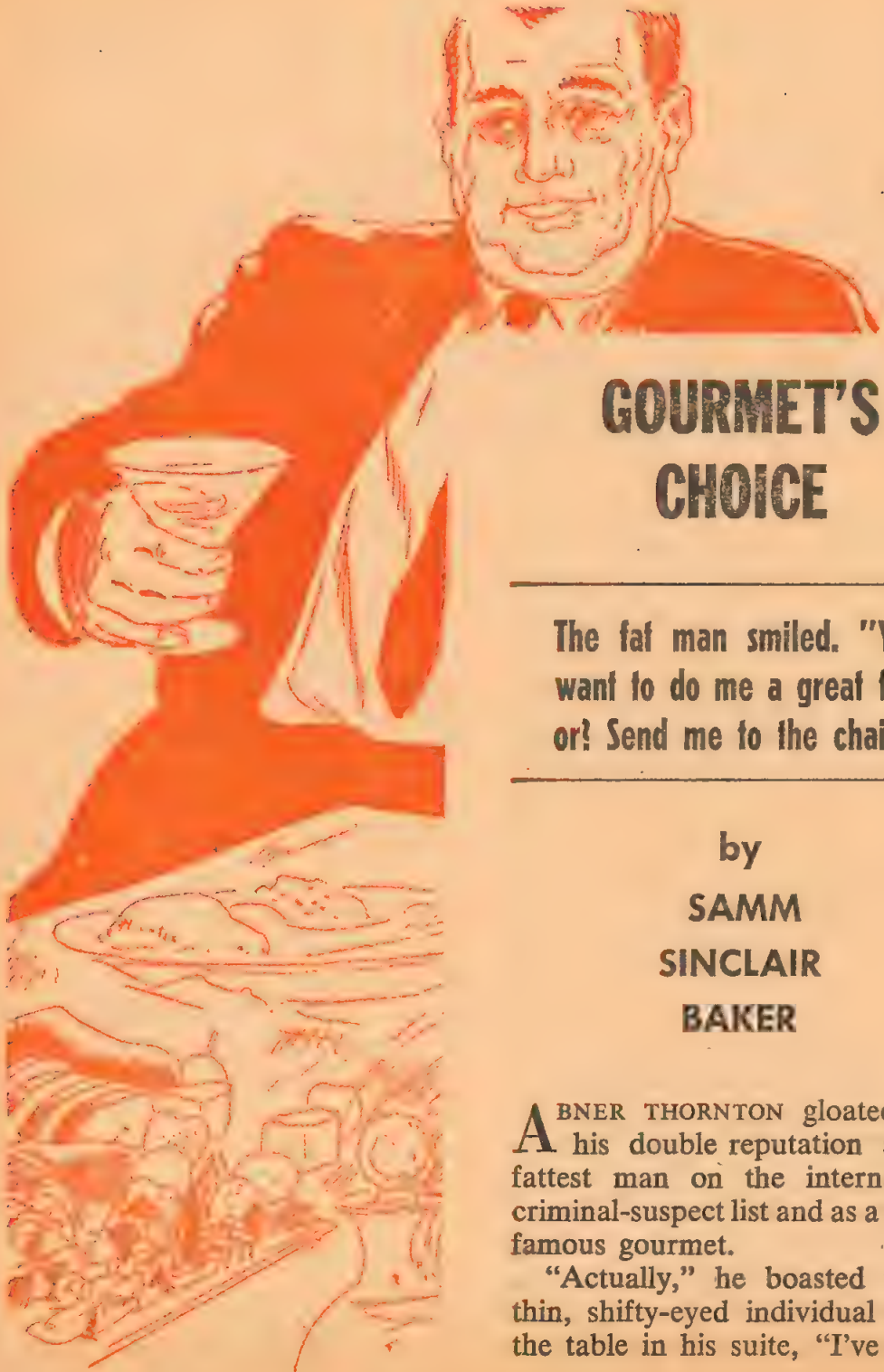
Mr. Reaser's interest picked up. "Stocks. Ah, yes." He looked at Sidney fully. "You've done pretty well, I presume?"

Sidney shrugged indifferently.

"I guess you could say that." They made some small talk about business in general and the state of the stock market. Then Mr. Reaser cleared his throat.

"By the way, Mr. Schliff, I happen to have a few thousand dollars lying idle at the moment. I wonder if you could suggest a good buy in the market?"

"As a matter of fact," said Sidney, smiling, "I can. Ten years ago I took a flier by buying up a quarter of a million dollars worth of stock in Brown Electronics. They were young then, but growing. I investigated them thoroughly before making the purchase. I could see no reason why my investment wasn't a good one. Well, sir, the gamble paid off. Apparently my money gave the company the shot in the arm it needed. Recently I had to sell part of my holdings to pay a rather large debt to my bank." Sidney's smile broadened. "My original investment had increased to more than two million dollars."



GOURMET'S CHOICE

The fat man smiled. "You want to do me a great favor? Send me to the chair!"

by
SAMM
SINCLAIR
BAKER

ABNER THORNTON gloated over his double reputation as the fattest man on the international criminal-suspect list and as a world-famous gourmet.

"Actually," he boasted to the thin, shifty-eyed individual across the table in his suite, "I've added

thirty-two delicious pounds since I last saw you two years ago."

His pig eyes glinted. Behind them he thought: this specimen intends to extort money from me; I'd kill him rather than pay a penny. Aloud he said, "Weighed in this morning at 316 precious pounds—"

"I don't give a damn if you're over a thousand pounds!" his dining companion interrupted. He threw his linen napkin down on the table top, one end falling into a plate, thirstily soaking up the rich, dark sauce of breast of chicken Perigourdine. He'd hardly touched the epicurean food. Afflicted with chronic ulcers, Shifty Morel was a poor eater at best.

His scowl tightened the skin over his skull-like features. "I didn't drag you a couple of thousand miles from the other side of the world to talk about your stinkin' grease—"

The heavy man's eyes turned as white-cold as the ice cubes in the champagne bucket at his elbow. With an obvious effort he controlled his rage.

"You shouldn't waste those succulent chicken breasts, Shifty," he said. "The sauce is enhanced with choice truffles and topped with the most lucious pate de fois gras."

Morel grunted rudely.

The fat man patted his swelling stomach. "My friend, these pounds have cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars, and worth every cent. I live only to eat. If deprived of the world's most exquisite gourmet viands, I'd rather die, and quickly. No question about it."

He belched happily. "Ah, the chervil, basil and eau-de-Cologne mint in that superb salad—I can taste them all again."

"The hell with food!" Morel snapped. "I came to talk about money. Big money. Hundreds of thousands of dollars. You have it. I helped you get it. I need some—now!"

Thornton frowned, lifted a massive hand to stop further talk. He swiveled his head toward the serving table near the door. A waiter was bending over it, half turned away, stacking soiled dishes.

The fat man growled, "Waiter!"

The man straightened his muscular frame, squared his shoulders unconsciously. He half bowed his head. "Yes, sir?"

Thornton regarded him carefully, noting the intelligent eyes, the athletic figure. Even for the Ambassador Towers, New York's most luxurious hotel, this was a superior breed of waiter. Shrugging imperceptibly, he ordered, "Out!"

"As soon as I clear up, sir."

"Out. Right now! I've signed the check—generously. So don't come back." He emphasized, "We don't want to be interrupted. I'll call down in a couple of hours to get the rest of this cleared away."

"Yes, sir. But—"

"Out!" The gross face was turn-

ing dangerously purple. Shifty Morel watched apprehensively, aware of Thornton's flaring temper from earlier days. He squelched a chill of fear, told himself—got to get the money. Even the ruthless fat man wouldn't dare risk violence here.

The waiter was wheeling the service table out of the room. He turned and pulled the door closed softly, shutting off his watchful eyes.

In the spacious suite, the still-angry behemoth rumbled, "I didn't like getting your phone calls overseas, Shifty. I left this country two years ago vowing never to return. I milked the richest juices from this town, was through with it. They couldn't pin anything on me but they were getting too close. I've refused to read or hear a word about this place, blotted it out of my consciousness—"

He roared, "I've had to come back because of your threats. His mountainous pulp trembled as he sought self-control. "They haven't anything on me—yet. And I'll keep it that way. Understand?"

The quivering paw reached for his champagne glass, drained the contents in one gulp. He closed his eyes, breathed raspingly, his body heaving. Gradually the tremors subsided. He opened his eyes, squinting icily. Quietly, "Well, Shifty?"

Morel unlocked his hands. His tongue darted out, licked his tight lips. "The district attorney's men have been after me since you left the country. They want evidence against you."

He stopped, gulped in air, continued defiantly, "You know I've got the evidence. I'll use it if you force me to. Then you couldn't escape them, no matter how far you ran. That's why you came back. You knew I had you cornered."

Thornton breathed thickly, his gaze fixed on the skeletal grey face. "Go on."

Morel whined, "I've had bad luck since you left. Gambling, stocks, horses, the tables—mostly the tables."

"None of my concern. I paid you off well." He reached for both champagne glasses, filled them from the magnum he lifted out of the frosted bucket.

"It's got to be your concern! I owe big gambling money. They said they'll kill me if I don't pay up. I helped you get away with over a million. I need a hundred thousand dollars now." He stopped, shrilled, "Now! Or else I'm dead—"

The deep, ominous voice echoed slowly, "And if I choose not to give the money to you?"

The hollow-eyed man gripped the table with both hands until the sharp knuckles threatened to pierce through the tight skin. He screeched, "I'll spill to the D.A. I've got to. At least he'll give me

protection from the others. From you—"

Thornton's thick fingers fumbled in a pocket of his light grey vest as he said, "You'd better change your mind."

Morel croaked, "I can't. If I don't pay up I get killed. My only out is the D.A."

The layered face slowly loosened into an unconvincing grin. The hard eyes held Morel's. Softly, soothingly, "I understand, Shifty. Relax." His hand hovered over the other man's champagne glass, the thumb and forefinger separating, hidden from his companion.

He pressed the back of his hand against his pulpy lips. "You ruined my dinner," he scolded. "A shame . . . the ramekins of shrimp in pink sour cream . . . the incomparable Vichysoisse Verte as only the Ambassador's Raymonde makes it. Worth coming back for that alone—and now you have spoiled it."

Morel's lips writhed in silent curse. He demanded, "Do I get the money?"

The thick eyebrows on the moon face lifted slightly. He spoke lightly, "Of course." He reached out, picked up his filled champagne glass. "Of course I'll pay you off, Shifty. You don't leave me much choice, do you?" He raised his glass toward Morel who had sagged back in his chair in relief. "Let's drink to it."

The exhausted man shook his head weakly. "No. You drink both glasses. I can't. My stomach—"

The fat man roared, "Damn your stomach! You boor, this is Dom Perignon nineteen fifty-five!" He lowered his voice, "We drink to our bargain like a pair of gentlemen, or it's all off and to the devil with you." He assayed a smile which became a hideous distortion of fleshy creases. "A toast to our mutual futures."

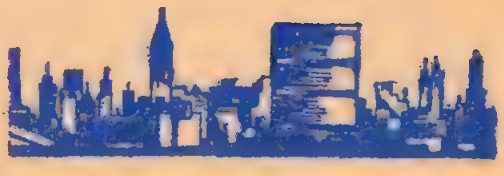
The scrawny hand picked up the bubbling drink, drew it reluctantly to his slitted mouth. Grimacing, he gulped down the contents to get it over with. Almost instantly he exploded a strangled cry, dropped the glass, clawed at his throat with both hands. He fell back, rigid fingers still hooked at his throat, dead eyes rolled up at the ceiling.

The fat man rose ponderously to a surprising six feet. His expressionless face was a mottled magenta as he loomed over the slight corpse. He pursed his lips in thought.

He moved stiff-legged to the phone, picked up the receiver, dialed a number. He stood erect, stomach swelling, his back to the dead man and the door. He didn't hear or see the door open and close.

He spoke softly, "Ludvic? Thornton here. I have a package for you to get rid of, as we discussed this afternoon. Bring Riker along. The Ambassador Towers. Suite seventeen C. Hurry."

Replacing the receiver, he lifted both hands to his face, kneading the hot, bulging cheeks, breathing hoarsely. He turned back toward the table, stopped abruptly. He stared, lowered his arm slowly to his sides.



The waiter was facing him, back against the door. The fat man's eyes roved to the rigid figure on the chair then returned to the standing man. He said, "You're not just a waiter."

The muscular man answered, "District attorney's office, Mr. Thornton. My name is Cory, Ray Cory."

Thornton nodded, his expression bland, even faintly amused. "You don't look like a waiter." He moved sluggishly, his left hand feeling toward his heart through the layers of fat. He settled again into his chair at the table. His stomach rumbling, he reached out and refilled his glass with champagne.

Cory crossed the room, used the phone, spoke into it briefly. He returned to his previous position, back against the door. He said, "I'll be interested in meeting Ludvic and Riker too when they arrive."

Thornton glared, then shrugged and raised his glass. "I don't suppose you'll join me in some bubbly? Dom Perignon '55—" He glanced toward the dead man, burst into uproarious laughter, explained, "Morel didn't enjoy it."

He quieted, sipped, relaxed. "It doesn't really matter," he said. "I half expected to be caught. It's worth it to get rid of that slime." He indicated the dead man.

"Why did you kill him? You took a big chance."

"Why?" The fat man reddened. "He threatened me! He demanded one hundred thousand dollars. Hush money, I believe it's called. One hundred thousand dollars this time. How much next time?"

He paused, reflected, nodded. "But it wasn't just the money. I'm a man of great appetites, Mr. Cory. I possess strong emotions and vengeance is one of them. If I don't satisfy my appetites I find it difficult to live peaceably with myself. Morel had to be eliminated for his presumption in threatening me, if for nothing else."

He giggled at his own mischief like a naughty child. He went on: "Morel started hounding me overseas with demands in letters, cables, calls." He frowned. "It was starting to spoil my appetite—I couldn't have that."

Cory said, "You'll be paying a high price for vengeance."

The fat man shook his head, answered indulgently, "No, Mr. Cory. The joke is on you, on the authorities."

Puzzled, "How so?"

Thornton laughed exultantly. He filled his glass again, drank deeply, gurgling with sensual satisfaction.

His breath caught; he was shaken by a fit of coughing. Cory watched silently.

The red-faced murderer recovered his voice. "My friend, I live only to eat. Recently the doctors told me I had but a few more months to live unless I took off weight. I'd rather not live without savoring to the fullest the finest foods the world can provide. So I eat as I choose, and thus I choose to die."

Thick laughter erupted from deep within him.

Cory asked, "What has that to do with being convicted of murder?"

"It should be obvious," the bit man said. "I'll plead guilty, get a quick trip to the electric chair. I'd soon be dead anyhow. So I have my cake and eat it too, so to speak." He smirked. "The joke is on you. I get my revenge." He gestured at the corpse. "You pull the switch."

The muscular man was shaking his head. "The joke is on you, Mr. Thornton. You've been away from this country too long. Two years without any contact. The joke is on you."

The broad face frowned, then pushed forward. He demanded, "How so?"

"On June first, nineteen sixty-five, Governor Rockefeller signed a law abolishing capital punishment in New York State. You'll be convicted of murder, yes. But no quick death in the electric chair. You'll spend the rest of your life in prison."

The staring, bloodied eyes roved wildly.

Bubbles of saliva dribbled out between the thick lips.

"No," he blurted between labored breaths, "no, you can't do that to me."

"Did you ever eat prison food, Mr. Thornton?" The fleshy head rocked as with unbearable pain. "Nourishing, but there's none less palatable. Uninspired food, Mr. Thornton.

"Bland, overcooked, soggy steam-table servings day after day after day."

"No!"

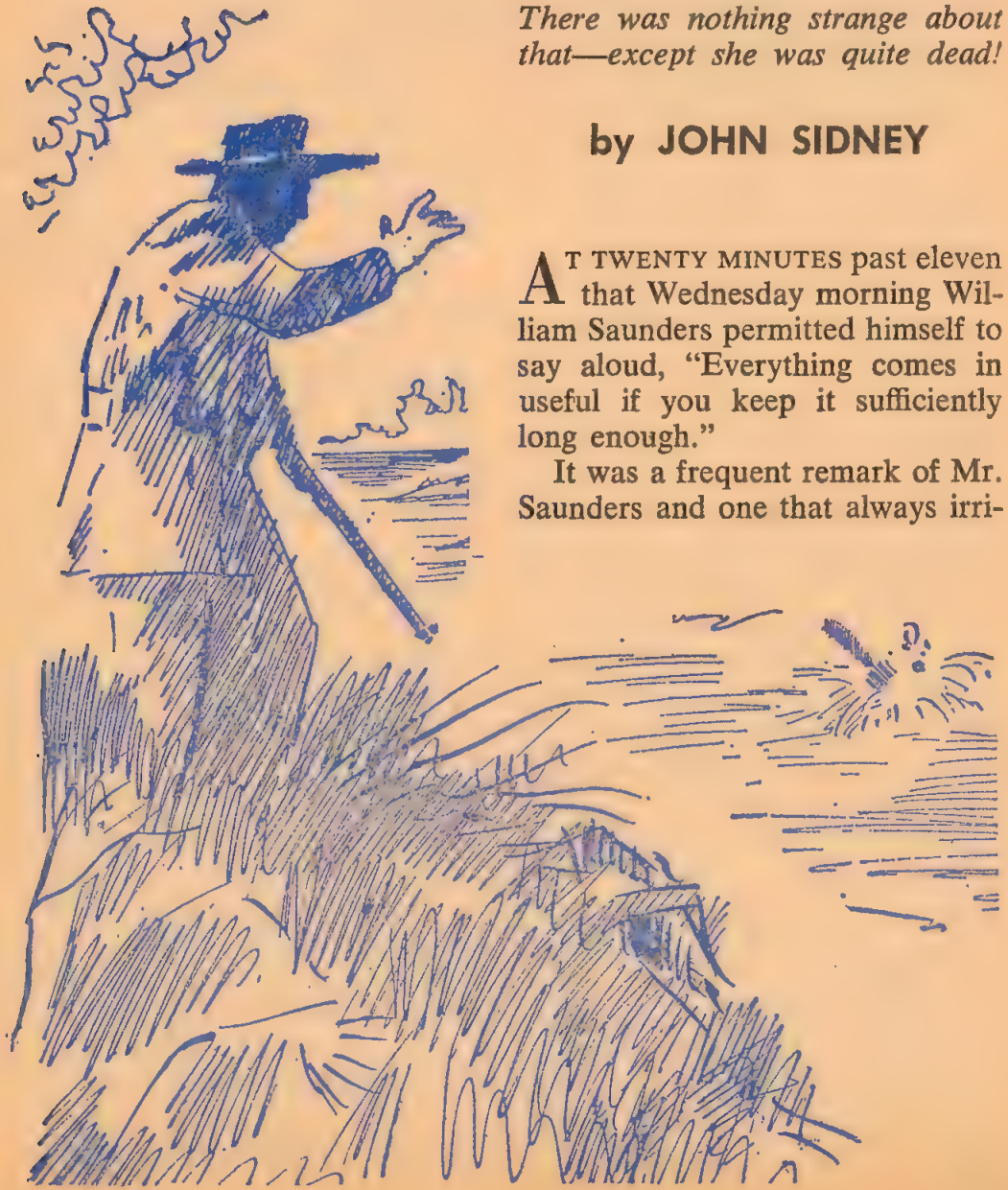
The doughy-white face fell forward onto the table. The stricken man continued staring at the speaker.

"Cheer up, Mr. Thornton," Cory went on. "You'll surely lose weight on those tasteless, limited meals. You might even live on and be chewing away and swallowing down that repulsive prison food for ten or twenty or more years before you die."

MURDER off the record

"Good-by, my dear," she said. There was nothing strange about that—except she was quite dead!

by JOHN SIDNEY



AT TWENTY MINUTES past eleven that Wednesday morning William Saunders permitted himself to say aloud, "Everything comes in useful if you keep it sufficiently long enough."

It was a frequent remark of Mr. Saunders and one that always irri-

tated his wife but could not do so on this occasion. Three minutes earlier, Mr. Saunders, as he had planned for months, had killed Mrs. Saunders as she lay in bed.

Mr. Saunders had chosen a Wednesday because that was their servant's day off. He had chosen this Wednesday because their old friend, Mr. Joseph Reynolds, of London, was staying at the Saunders' Hampshire home and would, unwittingly, corroborate the alibi Mr. Saunders was at this moment preparing.

Mrs. Saunders never rose before noon, but lolled in bed, eating chocolates and listening to television. That practice, as much as her money, had made Mr. Saunders plan her murder.

Three minutes earlier Mr. Saunders had delivered a few neat precise blows with what he confidently anticipated would appear in the police reports as "a blunt instrument."

In point of fact, it was a hammer and at the moment it was in Mr. Saunders' shooting bag. During the next half hour, while out in his fields seeking hares with Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Saunders would drop the hammer in the river.

As he busied himself in his wife's bedroom, making it appear that she had been struck down by a burglar, Mr. Saunders congratulated himself on keeping that early tape recording of his wife's voice. They had made it together one night three years ago, when Mr. Saunders had first bought the tape recorder and when their relations had been rather better.

Mrs. Saunders had spoken a number of random phrases and sentences which Mr. Saunders had snipped out and joined together a few nights earlier and now proposed to put to good use.

Mr. Saunders rapidly tossed out the contents of wardrobes and drawers and filled his pockets with her jewelry—the pearl necklace, the diamond brooch, the three rings —one he took off her finger—and the bracelet of sapphires.

These, too, would go into the river in the next half hour. It was a pity, Mr. Saunders commented to himself, but he'd be a fool not to play safe.

Mr. Saunders, fifty-five, dapper, with a neat mustache, stood still and checked his work, including the still figure on the bed whose money he would now inherit, satisfied himself that he bore no blood stains, and then turned on the recording machine.

It would play silently for five minutes—time enough, as Mr. Saunders had planned, for him to call Reynolds from his room, where he was writing letters.

Mr. Saunders went downstairs slowly with Mr. Reynolds, unobtrusively stealing glances at his watch. He was a few seconds ahead of time.

"I have timed it as neatly as a

well-planned military operation," Mr. Saunders told himself. "Everything is possible if it is tackled in the right way. Perhaps, if I had had better luck during the war and fewer fools over me, I might have emerged as one of the great leaders."

Mr. Saunders sternly called himself back to business. It was twenty-nine minutes and forty seconds past eleven.

"Take it slowly to her door and pause for eight seconds," Mr. Saunders told himself. "Wait. Wait. Wait. Now it is time."

Mr. Saunders spoke, "Good-by, Lucy. We're off now."

Here it came. "Good-by, William. Have a good time."

"Yes, we will," said Mr. Saunders.

"I'll stay in bed and listen to the radio while you're away."

It had been a joke with them then, three years ago. Mr. Saunders had laughed on the tape.

Remembering now, Mr. Saunders laughed before saying: "All right, dear."

Joseph Reynolds called out his farewell, "Good-by, Mrs. Saunders."

Mr. Saunders allowed himself to congratulate himself on what happened next. Music swelled up in Mrs. Saunders' bedroom.

"She's turned the radio on. I don't think she heard you," said Mr. Saunders. "Let's go."

As he and Reynolds gathered

up their shot guns in the hall and went outside, they could still hear the music distantly.

"Lucy is keen on the Light Program," offered Mr. Saunders. "Listens to it by the hour." And told himself, "That was a masterly touch—to link up that old tape recording of a B.B.C. light music broadcast. But there's a use for everything if you keep it long enough. Joe Reynolds has no ear, I know, and will recall only that there was music."

In the next twenty minutes, as he had planned, Mr. Saunders separated himself from his guest. There was no one to see as he tossed the hammer and the jewelry into the river.

Mr. Saunders shot well. He bagged three hares, all of them difficult. At twelve-thirty they returned to the house for lunch. In the drive Mr. Saunders made an excuse to hurry ahead, called out to his wife, ran up the stairs, switch-

ed off the tape machine, carried it to his bedroom and hid it in a cupboard, doubled back to the bedroom and switched on his bedside radio.

"Funny!" thought Mr. Saunders. "It's dead. But it's no matter."

Then he pretended to call out in well-pretended horror and his guest came racing up. After that there was the doctor and the policeman. While he told his story Mr. Saunders thought only lightly of the recording machine.

When things were settled down a little, there would be an opportunity to destroy that dangerous little roll of tape.

"I said good-by to my wife about half-past eleven," Mr. Saunders was telling the village constable. "She answered me and said something about us having a good time."

Mr. Saunders watched the thickset elderly constable writing slowly in his notebook.

That was a nice touch, thought Mr. Saunders, not to be too precise . . .

"She said she would listen to the radio," said Mr. Saunders and waited for Mr. Reynolds.

"I can confirm this," said Mr. Reynolds. "I heard her answer, 'Good-by. I will listen to the radio.' She turned it on because she didn't hear me say 'Good-by.' The music came on quite loud though I can't say what they were playing."

The constable wet his pencil and then wrote.

"Something on the Light Program," said Mr. Saunders.

"I have no ear for music," said Mr. Reynolds. "I was trying to place what it was when we were in the hall."

"In the hall—downstairs?" asked the constable, frowning. "You are sure of that, sir?"

"Positively," said Mr. Reynolds, frowning.

Mr. Saunders was watching the constable's face and he felt his own growing tighter.

The constable was pursing his lips.

"There was Mrs. Dale's Diary up to 11:15 on the Light Program," said the constable. "After that, no music. I had the set on at the station—"

"But I heard the music, constable," said Reynolds. "It was just after half-past eleven. The music came up—I have no ear for tunes —but I'd swear to the time."

"There was no music," said the policeman. "There couldn't have been—" The constable went on talking and his eyes bored suspiciously into Mr. Saunders. Mr. Saunders listened and knew he was undone.

"You see, sir, there was a power breakdown and the transmitter at Droitwich, which serves this area, went off the air . . ."

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